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SAINT ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

a KINGDOM and a CROSS

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI

HELENE MAGARET

THE BRUCE PUBLISHING COMPANY
MILWAUKEE

NIHIL OBSTAT:

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Censor librorum

IMPRIMATUR:

✙ ALBERTUS G. MEYER
Archiepiscopus Milwauchiensis
June 12, 1958



Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 58-12232

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MADE IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Prologue

WHEREVER CATHOLICS KNEEL to make the Novena in Honor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, they repeat the prayers of St. Alphonsus Liguori. Wherever Redemptorist Fathers, with the great rosary and crucifix hanging from their belts, conduct parish missions, they spread the wisdom of St. Alphonsus Liguori. When daily the same priests offer Mass according to the Roman rite, the Byzantine rite or that Old Slavonic liturgy still used by the Ruthenians, they remember St. Alphonsus Liguori. Every year on the second of August, Catholics throughout the world pray for his intercession. Few, however, know the story of his life.

It is consistent that a world which has largely rejected Christian morality should neglect the saint who was the world's greatest moral theologian. When the devil turns the hearts of men toward evil, their memory of good grows dim. Their minds become confused. Within their own lives they suffer the Agony in the Garden, but they do not know what they are suffering. They see around them the eternal Passion of Christ, but they do not recognize what they are looking at. This book is for such men also, since it is the story of one who, having devoted his life to the Passion of our Lord, was destined to live that passion — step by step — to the end of his days and to die in his own Ninth Hour.

AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I wish to thank Father Donald F. Miller, C.S.S.R., for allowing me to make free use of the material in the excellent biography *Saint Alphonsus Mary de' Liguori*, which he wrote in collaboration with Father L. X. Aubin, C.S.S.R. Father Miller has also been generous enough to read the manuscript of this book and to give me valuable suggestions.

A KINGDOM AND A CROSS

I

IT WAS AUGUST 13, 1704. The War of the Spanish Succession was in its third year, and all afternoon the villages of Hochstadt and Blenheim shuddered under the sound of artillery fire and clouds of smoke rising against the gray Bavarian sky. The Duke of Marlborough's troops were fighting the French in the Danube marshes, where infantry slushed through mud and cavalry horses splashed in the beds of streams. That night, when the Battle of Blenheim was over and the Duke rode into quarters, too weary for the full taste of his victory, he did not know that he had broken the backbone of the struggle. In fact, more blood was to be shed and nine years were to pass before the Treaty of Utrecht would be signed.

Meanwhile Italy waited, except in the north where the French forces under Marshall Vendôme were pressing the Piedmontese back on Turin. The central part of the peninsula consisted of a broad band of Papal States. There the Church still held undisputed sway. Elsewhere it was so driven to death politically by the power of temporal rulers that its popes for some time had been signing away bit by bit the shadow of worldly authority in the hope of maintaining some substance of spiritual force. Intellectually it was beset by heresies — from within, by Jansenism and Gallicanism; from without, by Protestantism and a new disbelief which spread like fungus in the spoor of Cartesian thought.

To the south the stagnated Kingdom of Naples sweltered in the August heat. After two hundred years of Spanish rule it was soon to be delivered to Austria. Most Neapolitans would not care. Through five powerful corporations known as the *seggi*, the nobility had, long before the coming of the Spaniards, kept the poor under their heels. Later the Spanish viceroys, generous with

their bribes, titles, and flatteries, used the *seggi* as they wished. As a result, the rural districts had been plucked as clean as a spitted hen. The city itself was crawling with filth and poverty. On market days *zampognari*, wearing goatskins, with their legs tied up in thongs of hide, would come down from their mountain homes to trade goats' cheese for yellow grapes or the big green melons that came by boatloads from Sicily. Ragged fishmongers would trudge from the wharves along the harbor to the Mercato, carrying on their heads baskets of oysters and clams and sea urchins. Weavers would spread out their woolens and silks. But the cheese, the fish, and the textiles were taxed so heavily that little came from the bartering but hatred and despair and a few coins to spend in the wineshops. At nightfall the *zampognari* would climb back over the rocky hills to their lonely, squalid villages. The tax money would be sent away to fatten the coffers of Spain.

On the mountainside above the city lived the rich. The broad, white façades of their villas glittered in the sun, and their gardens lay hidden behind high walls and poplars and stone pines. In spite of two centuries of servitude, the nobility still maintained a patriarchal pride reminiscent of the days of ancient Rome. Their first-born sons were aggregated to the *seggi*; their younger sons became cardinals and bishops. Their women might open their larders to the poor; but the men rode haughtily among the starving and knelt just as haughtily before the Lord.

Into this world Alphonsus Liguori was born. When the Battle of Blenheim was fought he was not quite eight years old.

On that afternoon he had been perched before his desk for more than two hours, so primly erect that he scarcely seemed a living child. Only the wheeze of his breathing betrayed the asthma which afflicted him. Although his eyes were on a Latin grammar, he could not study. The royal galleys, he knew, were in port, and his father must even then be riding up the wide avenue known as the Toledo, which led out of Naples into the hills, toward the village of Marianella. He sat listening for the sound of hoof

beats. When he heard them his heart began to pound, the wheezing grew louder. He crossed himself and began to repeat rapidly a prayer which his mother had taught him, for help in trouble.

A gate slammed outside, dogs barked and footsteps scurried across the flagstones. Then his father's voice rang loud and clear. "It's a land war. If there'd been a sea battle, we wouldn't have stood a chance. Half the slaves were down with scurvy!"

Alphonsus ran to the open window. In the courtyard below he could see his father still astride his horse, glittering in the scarlet and gold of his dress uniform. A groom held the bridle, waiting for his master to dismount. Two harriers were teasing the horse with their noisy welcome. In a pool of sunlight near the stable door lay the foxhound bitch which had been crippled during the fall hunt. Alphonsus loved her.

Don Joseph Liguori swung himself out of the saddle, patted the dogs and looked about him with the satisfaction of a landlord appraising his property. He had been gone for nearly a year.

"By our Lady," he said, "it's good to be home!"

Alphonsus watched him walk toward the mansion. He heard another door open and a moment later his mother's voice, the heavy tread of boots inside — then silence.

An hour passed before one of the house servants came to the boy's room. "Your father is ready to see you," she said.

He followed her, unconsciously dragging one foot a little in his reluctance and looking very small on the wide expanse of marble stairs. It was this first hour with his father that he dreaded above all things. His thin child's face, aquiline nose and slight body gave him the appearance of a fledgling. Yet there was something inconsistent with childhood in the solemnity of his face.

Although five centuries had passed since Marco Liguori governed Naples, Don Joseph's family had succeeded in maintaining an ancestral dignity which no one could dispute. Nevertheless, as captain of a royal galley Don Joseph had acquired a roughness out of keeping with traditional nobility. He disdained, or affected to disdain, the suave, almost effeminate manners of those Neapoli-

tans who spent their time at court or in the drawing rooms of princes. Violence was in his blood. He had been habituated to it for years—to Barbary slave markets, to stormy seas, to convicts straining at the sweeps—even to the unpleasant necessity of watching his warders mutilate the ears and noses of insubordinate oarsmen. His gestures were vigorous. His voice had grown loud from shouting above the roar of waves and the crack of whips. Yet he was a virtuous man, one who worshiped a holy trinity of God, country, and family name. He was prompt in paying both his taxes and his church tithes. When he was on shore he sat with the *seggi* on weekdays and attended Mass on Sunday. He pleased the monastic orders with the size of his benefactions, and once, it was said, the soldiers on his galley laid a wager that he would not neglect his prayers even if the ship were under fire.

Now he stood in the middle of the room which served him as both library and office. His feet, which wore the spurred boots already out of fashion, were planted wide apart on the thick carpet. Although he was not a big man, everything about his build seemed ponderous—the heavy jowls, the short neck, the thick-set shoulders bisected in back by a ridiculously small queue of black hair. It seemed to Alphonsus that whenever his father entered a room, he filled it.

The boy stopped in the doorway and held his breath for a moment, hoping he could keep from wheezing. Then he gave up. "Welcome home, Father," he said with a forced smile.

The eyes under Don Joseph's beetling brows looked up sharply. "Thank you, Alphonsus. I see the asthma's no better. Come in."

The boy approached, knowing exactly what would happen. Each year the ritual was repeated.

"Show me your arm."

Alphonsus pushed the sleeve back to bare his upper arm. As he did so, he realized, with what was almost physical pain, the thinness of it. His younger brother, already half a head taller than he, could down him in any wrestling match.

Don Joseph felt the boy's muscles, tapped his chest, turned

him around, studied him from head to foot, gently, almost affectionately — yet at the same time somewhat in the manner of a buyer examining horseflesh. Finally he lifted the boy's chin, so that Alphonsus felt the gold ring on his father's forefinger press painfully into his flesh.

"Well, you've grown some, but not enough. You're still undersized." His father released his grip.

"Yes, Father. I know."

"You'll have to hold your head high, stand straight and grow — Grow! Do you understand?"

"I've been trying."

"I don't doubt that. Sit down now."

Alphonsus sat down on one of the high-backed chairs, his short legs uncomfortably suspended in the air.

Don Joseph began pacing slowly back and forth across the room, a splendid hulk of scarlet and gold. He spoke not so much to the boy as to himself. "There's little you can do about building muscle until you get rid of that confounded wheeze. But if you can't build muscle, at least you can build brains."

"I can sit a horse well," Alphonsus said hopefully. "Mother lets me ride the roan stallion sometimes. Of course the groom goes along."

"She tells me your studies are progressing," Don Joseph said, thus preventing any satisfaction his son might derive from horsemanship.

Alphonsus made no comment. He braced himself for the second part of the examination.

His father stopped pacing the floor and stood in front of him, head lowered, hands clasped behind. "Well, let's find out if the new tutor has earned his keep. What have you learned?"

"I've been studying history, Latin, music, and mathematics." The words came slowly, as if some danger lay in the admission of them.

"Very good. What do you like?"

The boy's face lighted. "I like music, sir."

"So do the girls," his father said contemptuously.

The light in the boy's face went out.

Don Joseph went to his *escritoire* and took from it his enameled snuffbox. "What history have you been reading?"

"About the Punic Wars and how Hannibal brought his army from Spain to Italy."

It was the answer which Don Joseph expected. He had already interviewed the boy's tutor and perused the textbook, thus preparing himself for the examination about to take place.

"Very well," he said, standing with the opened box in one hand and a pinch of snuff between the forefinger and thumb of the other. "How many galleys were at his command?"

"None, sir. They went by land across the Alps."

For a moment his father was occupied with pushing the snuff into his nostril. Then he asked, "When did this march take place?"

"In 218, Father."

"For what purpose?"

"Hannibal wanted to conquer Rome."

"Rome!" Don Joseph pretended to be surprised. "Was he fighting against the pope?"

"No, sir. It was 218 B.C. There was no pope."

"Well," Don Joseph said with disgust. "How am I to know? Why didn't you say B.C.? 218 means nothing. There was a 218 A.D., you know."

"In 218 A.D.," Alphonsus said mechanically, "the Roman Emperor Macrinus was murdered at . . ."

"I didn't ask you that," his father snapped. "You're telling me about Hannibal's march. Did he meet with opposition?"

"The Consul P. Cornelius Scipio came to Gaul with an army, but Hannibal had already crossed the Rhone." Alphonsus spoke rapidly now. He had learned his lesson by rote and was determined to get through the ordeal before his father could interrupt again. "The Roman forces went back to Italy. Hannibal met them at Ticinus and at Trebia. The Romans lost. Hannibal wintered

in Lombardy. The next year he entered Etruria. He fought Flaminus on the banks of the Transimenus. Then Fabian pursued him . . ." At this point the asthma forced him to stop.

"Fabian?" his father asked, "Who was Fabian?"

"A Roman dictator."

"Fabian?"

"Yes. Q. Fabian Maximus." Alphonsus could tell by his father's expression that something was wrong. The blood rushed to his face. "Q. Fabian Maximus," he repeated. "I think . . ."

"You think!" Don Joseph roared. "You think! You're supposed to know."

Alphonsus sat deathly still in the big high-backed chair. The flush had given way to pallor.

Don Joseph resumed his pacing, silent for a while, as if giving the boy a chance to collect his thoughts. Finally he turned his question into an accusation. "You don't know, do you? You don't know the name of the emperor!"

"I did know, Father. Maybe I've forgotten."

"Forgotten!" his father snarled. "What good is it to know if you forget? Are you a sieve?"

The boy wanted to answer that he was not a sieve, but he dared not. He had memorized the whole of Hannibal's march and had still failed. All Roman history was chaff in the wind compared to the one name he did not know. He could feel rising within him the anger which, whenever his father baited him, battered the dikes of his resistance.

"The emperor," Don Joseph said scornfully, "was Fabius Maximus. Not *Fabian*, but *Fabius*. F-a-b-i-u-s! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir." Alphonsus managed to nod, but the dikes were weakening.

"*Dio mio!* It's bad enough to be a runt. Must you be a blockhead too?"

The thrust was fatal. The boy's face became constricted. His eyes flashed. "I'm not a blockhead! I'm not a blockhead!" he screamed, leaning forward and beating his knees with his fists.

"I'm not! I'm not!" His eyes filled with tears so that he could see nothing but his father's beetling eyebrows and could hear nothing but the rage that surged within him.

Then the tension broke. Don Joseph took another pinch of snuff. "Get your facts straight, boy," he said coldly. "If you're smart enough, one of these days you'll be a lawyer in the courts of Naples. Then you'll know that one small mistake can ruin the best legal case in the world."

"I'm sorry, Father." As soon as he said it, Alphonsus knew that he had lied. He was not sorry. He was only exhausted.

"Go back to your room," his father said, "and stay there until you've read your history again. You don't study enough."

Alphonsus got up. Once beyond the doorway he ran up the staircase so fast that he almost fell. In his room he threw himself across the bed and burst into sobs.

A few minutes later he heard footsteps down the hall. Desperately he prayed that his father would not come in. The footsteps stopped outside his door; a key turned in the lock. Then there was a rustle of silk and his mother's voice.

"Please don't lock him in," she was saying with an urgency that warmed his heart. "He's been studying all day."

"You mollycoddle him, Anna Caterina," his father replied, but there was no reprimand in his tone. "Discipline won't hurt. What a mind he has! Keep him at his books and he'll be the most brilliant man in Naples."

"Don Joseph!" his mother cried. "He's only eight years old . . ."

Alphonsus could hear no more. He stopped weeping and lay for a long time motionless on the bed. Then he got up and went to his desk. He looked for the history book which he had been commanded to reread, but he could not find it. No matter, he already knew it by heart. He pulled a sheet of drawing paper from a drawer and with his plumbago began making broad black strokes upon it: first, two vertical lines the length of the paper, then across the top of them two shorter horizontal lines, thus forming a cross. On the cross he sketched a figure with head bent to one

side, arms stretched wide. In the center of the hands and feet he placed black studs.

Although he thought that he had drawn the Crucifixion of Christ, the figure, in spite of its crudeness, was distinctly that of a thin-faced child with an aquiline nose.

When Alphonsus was ten years old his mother took him to the Palazzo Reale to be presented to the Duchess of Ascalon. They went on horseback, jogging along the precipitous, stony road that led down the mountainside from the village of Marianella to the city. Far off lay the blue bay, luminous in the sunlight. To the left smoldered Vesuvius, and directly under them seethed that chaos of palaces and stinkholes, of ostentatious wealth and disease-ridden poverty which was eighteenth-century Naples. The air was filled with the fragrance of spring and occasionally with music. Bare-footed peasant women, who carried water jars on their heads, passed by in silence; but once a boy, driving a flock of geese, came singing a love song. Long after he had passed Alphonsus hummed the tune.

Above the Toledo, where the cartroad began, they dismounted and took a carriage. The carriage was soon caught in a maelstrom of traffic. Alphonsus stared spellbound at the throngs of people shoving their way through a confusion of mounted horsemen, lumbering ox carts, and little brown burros laden with produce. He was fascinated by the sight of an old woman lowering a basket from a second-story window and drawing it up again filled with her purchase of eels. He looked happily at the ragged children selling onions on long strings. When a stray goat, with a tinkling bell around its neck, passed close to the carriage, he laughed and reached out his hand to touch it.

As they alighted at the palace his mother gave him a handful of centesimi to toss to the beggars. A moment later they had passed the sentinels and were following the chamberlain into a great audience chamber where candelabra illuminated the frescoed walls. There Alphonsus had to stand stiffly in his full-skirted coat

and lace cravat beside fifty other equally stiff children waiting their turn to be received by the duchess whose husband, as viceroy, governed Naples for the King of Spain.

One by one the chamberlain called out the names of the children. Each in turn walked between rows of candelabra to the dais where the duchess sat. When Alphonsus heard his name read, he crossed the room and bowed low as his mother had taught him to do.

"Your humble servant, my lady," he said, aware only of suffocating perfume. He kissed the proffered hand. Then looking up he saw a heavily powdered face with a black, crescent-shaped patch under one eye.

"So you are Alphonsus Liguori," the duchess said pleasantly, speaking with a Spanish accent. "A child with the manners of a young man. How old are you?"

"I am ten, my lady," Alphonsus replied.

The duchess laughed harshly. It seemed to Alphonsus that her laughter drew everyone's attention. "It's bad practice to lie, *giovanetto* — particularly to your elders. Anyone can see that you aren't more than eight."

Alphonsus flushed. "I am ten," he repeated.

"You are too small for ten years," the duchess said contemptuously. "Tell me the truth."

"I am ten years old!" Alphonsus' voice had become high-pitched and stubborn.

But the duchess only shook her head, causing the pendants in her ears to oscillate. "No, you are lying," she insisted. "Admit it and I will forgive you."

"I am ten years old," Alphonsus repeated, now with an emphasis which was almost rude. "I was born in 1696, the year the League of Augsburg was concluded."

"*Madre de Dios!*" the duchess exclaimed in Spanish. "You speak as if you were fifteen."

"I am ten," Alphonsus said for the fifth time.

"Very well," the duchess replied irritably. "But truth or false-

hood, it is always wrong to contradict a superior. The next time be less impudent." She looked away as if bored.

The chamberlain had called out the name of the next boy. Although Alphonsus bowed again when taking his leave, the duchess ignored him.

It was late in the day when he was once more seated beside his mother in the carriage. This time they were going up the Toledo toward the mountain. His earlier happiness was gone. Now he felt only relief to have left the Palazzo Reale with all its ugly splendor and some gratitude that Anna Caterina did not smell of perfume or wear patches.

"The duchess is supposed to be very beautiful," his mother commented. "Did you find her so?"

"She is vulgar and stupid," Alphonsus answered.

Anna Caterina smiled. "You shouldn't judge so rashly. Yet it may be so. You'll find when you grow up that there are many stupid persons at court and many wise ones in hovels."

Alphonsus stared at the throngs of people, who no longer seemed happy — only tired and wretchedly poor. "Didn't the duchess go to school?" he asked.

Anna Caterina shrugged her shoulders. "How should I know, Alphonsus? Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't think she'd ever heard of the League of Augsburg."

Anna Caterina looked at her son in amazement. "Why, Alphonsus, what a strange thing to say! How would you know?"

"That's the way she acted when I spoke of it."

"When you spoke of it! You spoke to her of the League of Augsburg?"

"Yes, Mother."

"For heaven's sake, why would you do that?"

"I told her I was born in that year."

Alphonsus wondered why his mother burst into laughter, but the crack of whips, the clatter of wheels and the shouts of hawkers made further conversation difficult.

They passed a driver mercilessly beating his donkey. They forced their way between an oxcart and a girl leading a cow by a rope. Finally the carriage became so hemmed in by traffic that the driver brought the horses to an abrupt stop.

At that moment a man thrust out his open palm. "Centesimi, my lady! Centesimi!" he begged.

Anna Caterina put two lire into the palm.

Although the hand was withdrawn, it soon reappeared. "*Grazie!* May our Lady bless you. Lire, more lire, in the name of Christ!"

Anna Caterina ignored the plea.

Suddenly the beggar's head protruded half into the coach. Instinctively Alphonsus cried out, for the man's face was covered with open sores. "Lire, lire!" the beggar whined. The traffic had begun to move again and the coach went with it. The beggar, however, kept walking along, repeating his cry for alms. They had gone perhaps fifty yards when the coachman turned and, lifting his whip, struck the man so hard that he fell to the ground.

Alphonsus covered his face with his hands and moaned.

"Alphonsus, don't," his mother protested, drawing him close to her. "It was his own fault. I gave him an alms." She tried to take the boy's hands, but he drew back from her. "You'll have to get used to sights like that. There's nothing anyone can do except pray. It's a terrible thing to be poor."

"The driver didn't have to strike him," Alphonsus said, striving to control his sobs. "Why did he do it?"

His mother was silent for a moment. "Perhaps," she said bitterly, "because it's also a terrible thing to be rich. He does what everyone must do. There are so many beggars."

For the rest of the ride home, they did not speak to one another.

The following Saturday Alphonsus was kneeling in the pew of the Church of the Oratorians. He had just made his confession. As usual, Father Pagano came out of the confessional and waited for him at the church door.

"Good afternoon, Alphonsus," he said. "You look as miserable as a wet cat."

Alphonsus smiled. He loved and trusted Father Pagano, who never asked him when he was going to grow as tall as his brothers or mentioned his asthma.

"Come on, tell me. What's the matter?"

"I think, Father," Alphonsus said. "Well, I think it's wicked to be rich."

"Who's rich?" the priest asked casually.

"We are, Father . . . the Liguoris. That is, some day I will be."

"That's not your fault, Alphonsus. God chose your state in life for you. Do the best you can with it. There's nothing wrong in being rich."

"Is there anything wrong in wanting to be poor?" Alphonsus asked.

"One can be rich and still have a spirit of poverty. Pray for that."

"That's not enough," Alphonsus said grimly.

"Well then, let's see how much money you have," Father Pagano teased. "Open your purse now. Let's see."

Alphonsus opened the little money bag which he carried and emptied its contents into the priest's hand.

The priest chuckled. "Ten centesimi. And you think you're rich!" He put the money back into the boy's purse. "Go home, Alphonsus, and have a good time. Don't start worrying about money you don't have."

"I guess you're right," Alphonsus admitted, feeling suddenly lighthearted.

II

DURING THE NEXT TWO YEARS it seemed to Alphonsus that a whole new world was taking shape within his mind. Fragments of knowledge which he had earlier learned by rote no longer lay like a jumble of beautiful but useless tiles. By fitting together piece after piece, he discovered an emerging design. In time he would be able to map out the universe. Now when Don Joseph returned from his voyages, the examinations took on a different aspect. Historical events could be weighed in the light of their causes and effects. Philosophical systems could be demonstrated first, then either defended or destroyed. Nothing, it appeared, was supernumerary; nothing was insignificant. Mathematics had served Palestrina no less than Descartes, and Brunelleschi had built his churches on geometry.

During recreation, while his brothers and sisters played games in the garden, Alphonsus sat inside playing games with sonnets and hexameters. He improvised madrigals on the spinet. He copied in oils the courtyard outside his window, painting a nativity scene into the pool of sunlight by the stable door. The days were too brief for his thirst to be quenched, too full for his growing talents to be satisfied.

The smallness of his stature and the discomfort of asthma ceased to concern him. Only one shadow marred his happiness: the storms that blew up whenever his father was home. They came and went as suddenly as sea squalls, leaving in their wake a wreckage of shame and sorrow.

The customary storm, however, failed to break when Don Joseph decided to send Alphonsus to the Royal University of Naples to study law. Founded by Emperor Frederick II to serve despotism, the institution was little more than a training ground for bureau-

crats. Legal success was therefore a sure road to distinction. That fact cut no figure with the boy. The challenge did, for the courts were so corrupt that few attorneys could win cases and preserve integrity at the same time. The possibility attracted Alphonsus.

Although the university was open to young men from all classes, a caste system was rigidly followed. Alphonsus occupied in the lecture hall one of the front benches, which were reserved for students of noble birth. These students were often both boisterous and insolent. The gold tassels on their skullcaps bobbed brightly as they chatted with one another, made wisecracks, nodded or shook their heads in agreement or disagreement with the lecturer. Behind them sat the less fortunate, wearing no gold tassels. Quiet, intent, eager to learn, they strained to hear the lecturer's voice over the hubbub of spoiled aristocrats. Some were well but simply dressed. Others sat in threadbare robes, their faces lean with hunger. At the end of every lecture they stood in attitudes of forced respect, while those wearing gold tassels strutted out of the classroom first.

"What fools," a classmate once said to Alphonsus, "to think they can learn as well as we."

Alphonsus looked into the face of his companion. It was fat, saucer-eyed and vacant. "Some of them already know more than we shall ever know," he said gravely.

His companion laughed. "Do you think science is for fish-mongers?"

"Perhaps," Alphonsus said and walked away.

By that time Alphonsus had penetrated the dark, fetid alleys which impinged upon the Toledo. Here each day the indigent crawled from their troglodytic dwellings to enjoy the sunshine. They swarmed over the streets like an infestation of lice: diseased *lazzaroni*, slobbering old men, disheveled women with babies at the breast. Even the children who clamored for centesimi had little in their appearance to soften the heart of a young nobleman. If someone tossed an indiscriminate alms, they fought among themselves with the brutality of beasts. If alms were refused, they screamed obscenities.

Alphonsus, fastidious by nature and training, was repelled. Nevertheless, he knew they were not the originators but the victims of an infection which ate at the heart of the city, and he hated the arrogant young noblemen at the university who gave no thought to them. Yet were the Liguoris any better? he wondered. He thought of his father's fanatical concern for the success and rectitude of the family. Determined to keep the family pattern true, regardless of cost, Don Joseph labored over the task like a diamond cutter, as if the world existed only as a setting for his gem. In the beginning God had said, "Let there be Liguoris." Did anything else matter?

Such thoughts kept recurring to Alphonsus with the regularity of malarial fever. Try as he would, he could not push them away. They made him irritable and discontent, ashamed of his family and himself.

Then one day at breakfast Don Joseph glared at the footman who waited behind Anna Caterina's chair. "Dolthead! Dolthead! Dolthead!" he shouted, pounding on the table until the dishes rattled.

Alphonsus put down the bunch of grapes he was eating. His mother sat white-faced and motionless.

"Stand behind me! Behind me!" Don Joseph shouted at the footman. "Last week you insulted the guests. Now you insult the master."

The offender corrected his position.

Don Joseph resumed eating in silence, spitting out the seeds of his grapes and occasionally wiping his hands on his velvet jacket. Then he began to rail at the servant again. "Every movement you make is a blunder. An ox would serve me as well!" And he purposely shoved his chair back so quickly that it rammed the footman's ribs. "Well, don't keep standing there!" he thundered. "Remove the fruit plates. Get at it! Hurry up! See if you can manage once without falling over your feet."

While the footman hastened to obey, Don Joseph watched his misery with malicious pleasure, and from time to time he wet his

lips with his tongue as if savoring either the taste of grapes or of authority.

As always at such times, Alphonsus felt a black rage surge within him. He controlled it until the last of the service had been removed and the footman was beyond hearing. Then he stood up. "May God forgive you!" he said in a voice dreadful for its intensity. "You treat the footman worse than the dogs."

"The dogs have not offended me," Don Joseph replied curtly, and with unpremeditated quickness he struck his son across the face.

The boy stumbled to his room, dizzy and trembling. What had he done? he asked himself. All his compassion for the servant, all his anger toward his father were now washed away by a torrent of shame. "He that shall curse father or mother, let him die the death," the Lord had said; and by quoting the old law, had given it new sanction. The remorse which Alphonsus felt for what seemed a sin against the fourth commandment was so terrible that an agony of perspiration broke out over his body. He knelt before his crucifix and prayed, not only for the grace to control his anger, but for the virtue of blind, unquestioning obedience to his parents.

Henceforth he dedicated himself to that end. He never expressed a wish contrary to his father's. He never ventured an opinion without weighing its consequences. He carefully regulated his days so that every hour was accounted for: lectures, private lessons, study periods, and the short recreation permitted to him in the evenings. For the most part, he chose to pass this respite playing faro with a group of other university students. He would return home exactly when his father demanded, even if it meant withdrawing from the game at an awkward moment. Once only he failed.

On that night the boys, having lost interest in their game, were discussing their plans for the future. Alphonsus, who still sat at the gaming table, was idly matching spades from the deck with those enameled on the faro cloth.

"You at least have no worries," one of the boys said to him.

"You're already destined to be the most eminent lawyer in Naples."

"Thank you, Giovanni," Alphonsus answered without looking up. "Then I shall die with the satisfaction of having punished the poachers on some grand duke's estate."

The others looked at him with surprise.

"Why not?" one asked. "The purpose of law is to defend a man's rights."

"Rights?" Alphonsus put the real ace of spades over the painted one. "What are they? The right of a grand duke to his sport?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the boy named Giovanni.

"It seems to me," Alphonsus said, "that the rights of the poor are as important as those of the rich."

One of the boys laughed incredulously. "The poor have no rights! Anyone can see that."

"By administering justice, the law preserves both," Giovanni suggested.

Alphonsus agreed. "It should. Unfortunately power places rich Neapolitans beyond the law. Impotence places poor Neapolitans also beyond it."

"So I'm right after all!" the other boy exclaimed. "The poor have no rights!"

"Holy Virgin!" Giovanni groaned. "Alphonsus is arguing himself out of a career. Were that true, the law would be inoperative and you, my dear friends, could indulge in the pleasures of idleness."

"There you're wrong," Alphonsus got up from the table and faced his companions. "I agree. The poor have no rights. Nevertheless, the law is operative when the rights of two rich men conflict. I shall have a fruitful professional career. And," he added bitterly, "I shall burn in hell for it!" At that moment he looked at his pocket watch and saw that he had overstayed his permitted time by a full hour. Immediately he took his leave.

At home the great hall was empty, although candles still burned in his father's study. He took one of them to light the way upstairs. At the doorway of his room, he stopped in amazement. The candle-light dimly illuminated a scene of strange disorder. Every one of

his books had been removed. Desk, bed, and chairs were littered with playing cards. There seemed to be hundreds of them. The enigmatic faces of kings, queens, and jacks stared at him from the floor. A joker had fallen symbolically across an ace, as if to mock the scholar who had chosen to play the fool.

"Behold your studies!"

Alphonsus turned to see Don Joseph. He was holding a taper which revealed the heavy, black brows and the smile of inimitable scorn.

"These apparently are the books you like to read," he said derisively. "These are the authors who have brought you back at the appointed hour."

Anger swept over Alphonsus, like a hot sirocco. He withstood it by biting his lip until it bled. The minutes seemed like hours as father and son stood face to face in silence. Baffled by such unexpected behavior, Don Joseph did not know what to do. Finally he turned and walked away. From the doorway Alphonsus watched his father's candle flame move down the corridor. When it had disappeared, he began picking up the cards one by one. His hands shook and the taste of blood made him a little sick.

Although the University of Naples required that candidates for a law degree be over twenty years old, Alphonsus received a dispensation to stand for his examinations at the age of sixteen. Those examiners who disapproved of the privilege decided to retaliate by making the ordeal as difficult as possible. The boy's small body, lost in a doctoral gown too large for it, appeared ridiculous to them. His asthmatic breathing annoyed them. Consequently they fired their questions rapidly, and sometimes the questions were unreasonable. Alphonsus, however, had never forgotten his father's words: "One small error can destroy the best legal case." However hard they tried, the examiners could not trip him. Thus in 1713 Alphonsus Liguori receive his degree.

Scarcely had he acknowledged the congratulations of his examiners than the news of his success became conversation in the

drawing rooms of Naples. At Marianella, however, the victory belonged to Don Joseph alone. The Liguori name had triumphed; the family had once again proved its superiority.

"I kept him at his books," his father boasted to Anna Caterina. "And I'll keep him at his practice. Let him have his music in the evening, but law books by day . . . nothing but law books. Do you understand?"

"He should be planning his own time now," Anna Caterina suggested.

Don Joseph scoffed. "At sixteen!"

He did, however, refurnish the boy's room in a manner suitable to a man of affairs. He served him the best wine at table. He even discussed with him the entailment of a friend's estate. Yet when any real problem arose, Don Joseph solved it alone and Alphonsus complied.

Before that year was out the Treaty of Utrecht had been signed, and the Kingdom of Naples had passed from Spain to the House of Austria. A new flag was flying over Don Joseph's galley. This important event, however, made small change in the everyday life of Neapolitans. Alphonsus could practice law as freely under Austrian as under Spanish rule, and his reputation grew.

More and more frequently the young lawyer appeared in court, and at the end of three years he had not lost a case. Those who put their trust in him little suspected that at home he had never won a case, that there he was scarcely allowed to handle his own spoon at table.

III

IT WAS AUTUMN IN 1721. Since court was in temporary recess, Alphonsus sat in the garden reading a brief he had prepared the night before. Although he heard the tread of his father's boots on the flagstones, he did not look up. Don Joseph had spent the summer at sea, and with his return a month before he had precipitated the family into an unprecedented round of social activities. The cooks were forever preparing pastries; the cellarer was continually restocking the wine.

Don Joseph sat down on the stone bench beside Alphonsus, loosened his neckcloth and began complaining that one of the olive trees had been badly pruned. Then seeing that his son was not disposed to chat, he said abruptly, "Tomorrow we go hawking with the Prince of Presiccio."

Alphonsus turned back the page of his brief. "Again?" he asked.

"Again — what do you mean?" Don Joseph got up to examine the olive tree more closely. "We've never hunted with the Presiccios."

"We dined with them last week," Alphonsus commented dryly.

"And next week we shall attend the theater with them. The week after we shall very likely dine with them again." Don Joseph held one of the unripened fruits in his hand, rolling it back and forth between his fingers. "Guests, my son, are chosen at the pleasure of the master of the house."

Alphonsus did not reply. He continued reading until his father left.

The hunting party on the following day consisted of the Prince of Presiccio, his daughter Teresa, Don Joseph, Anna Caterina, Alphonsus and his youngest brother, Hercules. They rode with falcons on their gauntlets, except Hercules, who being still a child must content himself with sending a sparrow hawk against small

prey. Their dogs were flushing partridges on the estate of Prince Cariati. The property comprised some extinct craters overgrown with holm oak and poplars, a series of small, pleasant valleys and three inconsequential lakes—all well stocked with game and at the disposition of the prince's friends.

The Princess of Presiccio, Teresa's mother, had been indisposed the night before and unable to join the party. Although her daughter rode well, she showed little interest in the sport. She was a thin, colorless girl about seventeen years old. Even when her own hawk secured its prey, her dark eyes showed no enthusiasm. Sometimes she looked over or around Alphonsus; she never looked at him. At their very first meeting Alphonsus had thought, "She is born for the cloister." He was still more certain when he ventured to pay her a perfunctory compliment. Her reply had been almost a reprimand: "It is a grace for which I am not responsible," she had said, causing him to blush with embarrassment.

The others in the party, however, were in high spirits; their blood was stirred by the sound of horns and barking dogs and from time to time by the startling scream of a partridge twisting in midair to escape the pursuing hawks. Even Alphonsus, who claimed poor eyesight, brought down two birds and both times successfully retrieved his falcon.

By midafternoon the party turned homeward. The servants lagged behind with dead game dangling from their saddles, their pace hampered by Teresa's concern over the disappointed Hercules, who had bagged only one lark. In spite of his weariness Don Joseph rode well ahead, keeping Alphonsus at his side until they were beyond earshot. Then he drew rein.

"What think you of Teresa?" he asked.

"One woman hawks as well as another," Alphonsus said.

"You are impossible!" his father cried. "As a woman, not a hunter."

"I don't know, Father. I'm a student of law, not of women."

"You had better know, my son," Don Joseph said with annoyance. "I've chosen her for your wife."

Alphonsus checked an impulse to laugh aloud. "I did notice that Teresa's hawk is too slow on the wing," he said with pretended indifference.

"*Dio mio!*" Don Joseph shouted. "Is that your thanks for my trouble? Do you understand what I'm doing for you?"

"Perhaps too well." Alphonsus wished that the others would overtake them and put an end to this insupportable conversation.

"The Prince of Presiccio is one of the wealthiest men in Naples," his father continued. "Teresa is his only child. Barring his wife's death and a second marriage, which aren't likely, you would become —"

For once Alphonsus interrupted. "You needn't explain the inheritance laws to me, Father. But there's one thing I don't understand."

"What is that?" Don Joseph asked.

"Why you want to buy an additional fortune for me. Have the Liguoris become impoverished?"

Don Joseph's face, already red from exercise, took on a deeper hue; but fixed in his saddle and subject to the eyes of the hunters behind him, he could give no vent to his anger. A few minutes later the rest of the party rode up.

"Apparently," said the Prince of Presiccio with good humor, "Don Joseph prefers his son's company to ours. Must you Liguoris make a private party of two?"

"My father," said Alphonsus, "has found the party of two a very unpleasant one."

Don Joseph did not again discuss with his son the subject of marriage. In fact, he considered further conversation unnecessary since all negotiations could be handled between him and the prince, and since the festivities could be managed by their wives. Consequently, the hunting party was followed by evenings at the theater, dinners at home and musicals. The prince was evidently as pleased with the arrangement as Don Joseph. His wife, however, was often absent, still pleading ill health.

Then one night in the dining hall at Marianella, when Al-

phonsus as usual sat silent beside the equally silent Teresa, the prince leaned over to his host and whispered, "The continued indisposition of my wife may have troubled you."

"Not at all, not at all," said Don Joseph agreeably. "I see her delicacy reflected in the daughter. It is no doubt . . ."

"It's not what you think," the prince interrupted. "The delicacy of her condition has, in fact, made me the happiest of men."

Don Joseph looked thunderstruck. When he tried to speak, the words were an incoherent jumble.

The prince's whole face was alive with merriment. He did not seem to notice his host's confusion. "I grant you that it's something of a miracle," he said chuckling. "No one would have guessed that after fifteen years of barrenness, she would be expecting a child. If it's a son —"

"If it's a son!" Don Joseph roared. At that point he choked. A footman rushed to his attendance, but the host could not be quieted. Knocking over one of the wine glasses in his haste, he left the table and locked himself in his library.

Two days later the Prince of Presiccio received a neat little note in which Don Joseph Liguori, Captain of the King's Galley, formally terminated any plans for the marriage of his eldest son.

The following spring, at the instigation of a friend, Alphonsus spent a few days at the house of the Vincentians. He had made yearly retreats before, but always under the watchful eye of his father. Now he was alone — cut off not only from the bustle of the law courts and the streets of Naples, but also from the conical shadow cast by the house at Marianella. He walked in the monastery garden with a sensation resembling convalescent giddiness. The oleanders were a brighter shade than those at home, the cypresses were taller, and the songs of birds penetrated the stone walls like the thin, recurrent pain that follows illness.

On the second day, after Mass, when the other retreatants had left chapel, Alphonsus remained to make his meditation on the Passion. Again and again as he tried to gather his thoughts, some-

thing kept drawing him in a contrary direction. It was like a slight touch of the reins which, scarcely reaching the bit, yet causes the horse to veer. As often as he resisted, it returned. At last he gave up. He could not meditate; and in the very act of surrender he was swept into a bright, incomprehensible abyss. He saw nothing but light, he felt nothing, but he seemed to be listening to something. Was it a figment of his imagination? Or a moment of spiritual insight? One voice seemed to come from the bright, incomprehensible abyss. The other sounded like his own. No, they were both his own, answering each other with differences in pitch. Or they were not voices at all. Silence merely made articulate.

"You have grieved for the poor," the first said, "but have you loved Me?"

"I have resisted evil," he heard the other protest with such spiritual pride that the words repelled him, and he knew for the first time that every deference to his father's will had been only a sham or at best a self-centered triumph.

"You have kept the fourth commandment," the voice continued. "Have you remembered the commandment to love?"

"I have resisted evil." Now obstinacy was added to pride.

He saw himself as a child sitting at the window, looking down into the courtyard where his father had just dismounted. It occurred to him that he was waiting for his father's return with exactly the same kind of sufferance that he would show in waiting for a dose of bitter medicine.

"You have turned for comfort to music, to books, to the pleasures of the intellect. But I called from the tabernacle and you did not come."

Alphonsus buried his head in his arms. "I came as often as I could. Every hour of my day was planned for me . . ."

"You found time to train the black retriever for hunting . . . you broke in the jennet . . ."

"To please my father."

"To satisfy your self-esteem."

At the words Alphonsus seemed to be once more in the saddle,

the jennet's neck dark with sweat, foam dripping from her bridle. He was glad for the momentary light in his father's eyes and for his own equally momentary sense of power.

"I waited in the tabernacle and you did not come."

"Lord, have mercy on me!" Alphonsus opened his prayer book; but when he tried to read, the print scattered over the page like windswept leaves.

The voice persisted. "When you were a child, you spoke as a child, you understood as a child, you thought as a child. But he who becomes a man must put away the things of a child . . ."

Alphonsus closed the prayer book.

"Think you that I came to give peace on earth?"

"Not peace, God knows!"

"Not peace, but a sword."

After that came silence—a long silence which drew Alphonsus down into darkness. When the voice returned, the tone of it filled him with fear.

"I came to set son against father, daughter against mother. And a man's enemies must be they of his own household. He that loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me."

"Stop!" Alphonsus cried aloud.

At the same moment he saw that he was kneeling alone in the chapel and that it was quite dark except for the candles and a shaft of sunlight from a partly opened window. Outside the birds were singing. Then someone tapped him on the shoulder to say that lunch was being served.

Although Alphonsus continued the practice of law, more and more frequently he stayed out until late at night. On his return he would find Don Joseph pacing the floor of his library with the snarling restlessness of a caged animal. "Where have you been?" he would demand. The answer was always the same: "At the Hospital for Incurables." For a while his father believed that under repeated threats his son's unexpected zeal for charity would wear off. Finally one evening he shouted, "The Hospital! Do

you think the hospital can cure your asthma or add to your height? I don't object to charity. The devil himself knows the Liguoris have been generous with their alms. But your position in the city demands dignity. Send money, if you please. Build a hospital, if you must. But for God's sake, my son, don't go trailing your lawyer's gown among the filthy and diseased!"

When Don Joseph despaired of enforcing his commands, he said to his wife, "Alphonsus has something in his blood that he gets from you, Anna Caterina — monkishness! And I don't like it. He's twenty-seven years old and hasn't so much as dallied with a woman. A big fellow among the reprobates at the hospital and a dolt in the drawing room! It's time for him to marry."

So the whirl of dinner parties, dances, and concerts was resumed, with the purpose this time of acquainting Alphonsus with Francesca del Balzo, daughter of the Duke of Presenzano. She was a tall, buxom young woman, too bold for prospective husbands and too reticent for philanderers. Consequently, to the chagrin of her parents, she had celebrated her twenty-ninth birthday still under the parental roof. It was no wonder that she now hung upon Alphonsus with eager determination. By refusing to wear the high coiffures fashionable at the time, she tried to minimize her height, and by a pretense of childishness to hide her age.

"Alphonsus plays the harpsichord beautifully," she said one evening, fluttering her fan at the guests assembled in her father's drawing room. "Do play for us, Alphonsus . . . something you've composed yourself."

Obediently Alphonsus seated himself at the harpsichord and began to play.

At the end of the selection Francesca joined him. "How well you do everything," she murmured. "Come, let's entertain the guests together." Swaying slightly and moving her fan back and forth, she hummed something from a Scarlatti opera.

Alphonsus did not look at her.

"You know the song," she coaxed, letting her slim white hands

rest just above the keyboard. "You can play it from ear. Listen!" Again she hummed the tune.

Alphonsus remained motionless.

The guests, who were adept at turning even the shrug of a shoulder into scandal, watched the drama with thin smiles and eyebrows slightly raised.

Francesca could feel their uncharitable delight. She pivoted around the harpsichord, pouting a little and holding her unfolded fan across her powdered shoulders. Then she leaned over the keyboard. "Well, are you ready?" she asked. At the same time she closed the fan casually to give Alphonsus the full benefit of her bare neck and the heady fragrance of her perfume.

Alphonsus neither moved nor spoke.

The snub could not be mistaken. Flushing to the roots of her hair, Francesca turned to the guests. "It appears," she commented in a nervous pitch, "as if our brilliant lawyer has lost his mind." Then she flounced out of the room.

The following week Anna Caterina met Alphonsus in the garden. "The Duchess of Presenzano has written that your rudeness is an insult to their family."

"How unfortunate," Alphonsus replied with disinterest.

"Besides, it has caused much gossip." His mother's expression was one of hurt perplexity.

"Mother," Alphonsus said, "my father may make what plans he pleases, but they will come to naught. I have no intention of marrying."

They were walking side by side down a garden path which terminated in a circle. In the circle stood a sundial. There they stopped.

"What a strange decision for a first-born son to make," his mother said, thoughtfully running her forefinger along the diagram that told the hours, as if time held some undisclosed secret. "May I ask your reason?"

"I have asthma."

Although the inadequacy of the reply was a rebuff, Anna Caterina seemed amused. "Why, of course you do. I had quite forgotten that. Besides, Francesca has headaches. How cantakerous the two of you would be!"

Then they both burst into laughter.

IV

DON JOSEPH never mentioned to Alphonsus the fiasco at the Presenzano's. Most of the time he spent at the dry dock where his galley was being calked. He vented his ill-temper on the workmen pounding oakum into the seams and on the sailmakers unrolling their bolts of fresh canvas. Consequently the house at Marianella was left in peace.

At the same time he pinned his hopes on new victory; for Alphonsus had accepted a case against the Grand Duke of Tuscany in which 600,000 ducats were involved. Success in a matter of such importance would quiet whatever gossip still lingered in Neapolitan drawing rooms. The case had the further advantage of keeping Alphonsus from his hospital visits, since he found it necessary to spend his days in conference with his client and his nights in his study, his head buried in law books and papers. His father never disturbed him. The two men met only at table. Then they ate in silence, as if each was reluctant to interrupt the preoccupation of the other.

On the day of the trial, however, Alphonsus happened to pass through the great hall, where his father stood fumbling with the buckle of his sword belt.

"Rectitudo lucem adfert — directness enlightens," Don Joseph said cheerfully. Whatever further advice he had in mind for his son was never given, for he immediately banged his sword on the ground. "Confound this buckle!" he cried. "Ho there! Somebody come! Have we no grooms in the house?"

At once servants came running from all directions, tumbling over one another in their haste to attend their master. House dogs snarled at their heels. The sword belt passed from hand to hand, and all the lawsuits and galleys of Naples were trivial compared to the problem of the buckle.

Alphonsus left, taking with him the memory of a face contorted with anger and a short black queue standing straight out from his father's neck like the spout of an iron kettle.

By midafternoon of that same day Don Joseph, wearing another sword belt, had been twice to the gunsmith's and was again on the waterfront recruiting new oarsmen. At the same time Alphonsus in his lawyer's gown stood between the judge and a jammed courtroom, pleading his client's case against the grand duke. The argument had been organized with such logic and clarity that a murmur of praise rose from the spectators as he sat down.

Then Dominic Maggiocchi, attorney for the defense, took the floor. There was a swagger in his movements and a smirk upon his lips.

"Your honor," he said, bowing to Alphonsus, "the case is not what you suppose. If you will review the process, you'll find precisely the contrary of all you have advanced." He held out a sheaf of papers and pointed to a single line.

As Alphonsus scanned it, the color drained from his face. For the first time he saw a negative clause which, with all his study, he had somehow overlooked. Such a dizziness swept over him that he grasped the table at which he sat in an effort to steady himself.

"Yes," he said, bewildered and unable to rise. "I am wrong. I have no case to prosecute."

A gasp of astonishment rose from the courtroom, then a babble of voices, and finally the high-pitched laughter of a woman.

Alphonsus dared not look up. He remained slumped over the table while court was being adjourned and long after the sound of voices and the shuffling of boots had died away.

The news, which spread rapidly, reached Don Joseph before he had finished his day's business. He called for his horse at once; and disregarding the oarsmen still waiting to be interviewed, rode off. All along the Toledo carters drew to one side and children scrambled out of the way, for he spared no one in his urgency to get to Marianella.

There he found Anna Caterina in tears, the servants mute and

terrified, and the door of his son's room locked. All his pounding was in vain.

"Other lawyers have made mistakes," Anna Caterina said.

"Not such stupid ones!" Don Joseph replied.

For three days the door remained impregnable. Anna Caterina brought in succession breakfast, lunch, and dinner, knocked to no avail, and returned the trays to the kitchen. For the same three days, morning and night, Don Joseph pounded on the door and shouted threats that bordered on blasphemy.

"The boy will die of starvation," his mother moaned, her eyes red from weeping.

"Let him die!" Don Joseph snarled.

On the fourth day, however, Alphonsus appeared, wheezing with asthma, haggard from sleeplessness and fasting. He no longer wore his lawyer's gown. When his mother ran to him, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Everyone in Naples is talking about you," Don Joseph said. "You're a disgrace to the family."

"I know," Alphonsus replied with a lack of interest infuriating to his father.

"It's bad enough for a Liguori to fail in public. But dignity demands courage. You're no rabbit beset by hounds. Do you think your client will stab you in the street?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get back to your law practice. Take care of your clients. Appear in public. Be arrogant, be insolent, be a fool . . . but at least appear!"

"I've given up the law, Father," Alphonsus said.

Don Joseph was stunned.

From that time on, a shadow hung over the house of the Liguoris. Every day began with the thunderstorm of Don Joseph's attacks and ended in the darkness of his sullen silences.

Thus the situation continued until the eve of the birthday of the Empress Isabella, when the Liguoris were expected at a palace reception.

"You're coming with us," Don Joseph said in a tone intended to permit no refusal.

"No, Father. I'm through with such vanities."

The reply filled Don Joseph with ungovernable rage. "Vanities! Vanities!" he bellowed, turning upon his son as he had never turned upon a galley slave and shaking his fists in the air. "Get out, you pietistic fool! Get out of this house! Do what you please. I would to God you were dead for I can no longer bear to look on you."

Although Alphonsus knew that his father in full fury was capable of violence even to a son, he refused to move. When the terrible words were dead upon the air, he said quietly, "I have no father but God."

While the queen's birthday was being celebrated at the Palazzo Reale, Alphonsus went to the Church of Our Lady of Ransom to pray. Deep in his heart he believed that his humiliation was not caused by the failure in court, but by something else. More than a year had passed since his retreat at the house of the Vincentians. He had left that retreat confident of God's will for him. Yet he had done nothing. The Kingdom of Heaven had waited for the violent to carry it away, and he had remained tepid. Now the violence had been wreaked on him, not to disgrace him in the eyes of the world, but to awaken his blunted conscience. How blunted that conscience had been! It was as if in his long struggle to oppose his father's fury with mildness, he had acquired a habit of inanition, forgetting that even fury may be divine.

In the darkness of the church no voice came to admonish. He was alone with nothing but his failure and the lifeless statues staring down. The door of the tabernacle seemed inexorably closed against him, the light before it burned with glacial flame, and the church itself was but a tomb. This was the depth of nothingness, when the soul sees that it cannot so much as lift itself to an act of prayer.

He must have been kneeling for two hours. Yet he had not prayed. He could not.

The scent of wax lay heavy on the air. To the left of the altar three candles flickered before a statue of the Blessed Virgin. Alphonsus got to his feet, the very action causing him such effort that he seemed to be lifting the universe. Slowly he walked forward. When he reached the statue he looked into the face of the Mother of God — or rather into some artist's conception of that face — and he found it insipid. Just then, when his whole being was caught in a grip of repulsion, the church filled with light. He stood amazed, breathing in the glory of it until it penetrated his body with cauterizing pain and at the same time illumined his intellect. He became so certain of his destiny that he was never again to question it.

He knelt, folded his hands and said audibly, "At the foot of the altar of the Mother of God and my mother, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, I do solemnly promise to renounce all the pleasures of the world and to become a priest." Then like a soldier forever renouncing war, he unsheathed his sword and laid it across the sandaled feet of stone.

V

HIS EMINENCE, CARDINAL PIGNATELLI, sat at his writing desk in the episcopal palace at Naples. He was preparing his quinquennial report to the Holy See. The first page, dated October 15, 1723, lay to one side under a drift of blotting sand. The second page was still blank. Without moving from his chair, the cardinal could look out the window and across the piazza to where a cold rain was battering the façade of the Church of St. Maria Donna Regina. It was abominable weather, he decided. Picking up his quill with a sigh of discouragement, he returned to his task. As he sat doubled over the paper—for the cardinal was remarkably shortsighted—only the skull cap and episcopal ring distinguished him from the most insignificant of clerics. The script with which he was filling the page was tenuous to the point of enervation.

There is no dearth of ecclesiastics in the archdiocese, Your Holiness, but their quality is not commendable. Often those of low estate take vows for material security, and members of the upper class expect the Church to relieve them of sons who are addlebrained. The latter problem is complicated by pressure from secular authority. In that respect Austrian rule does not differ from Spanish. It is our hope . . .

The cardinal looked up, for one of his secretaries had just entered.

"Signor Liguori and his son are waiting."

The cardinal frowned. "Which son? The lawyer?"

"Yes, Your Eminence."

"Tell them I'm busy—besides, I can't intercede in legal matters."

The secretary hesitated. "It's Don Joseph Liguori."

"I know, I know. When the Liguoris speak even the heavenly

choir is said to bow — a supposition which I doubt." The cardinal thrummed upon his desk, considering the matter, then he added, "Very well. Show them in."

The door was opened and Don Joseph advanced, too briskly for his years, like a petty officer summoned before his superior. "Your servant," he said, kneeling to kiss the episcopal ring. Alphonsus, less vigorous, followed at his heels.

"You have fortitude to come out in the storm, Don Joseph," the cardinal commented. Although he was determined to make the interview brief, he offered them chairs and leaned back in his own to suggest that he was at leisure. "I think you know my policy is not to interfere in legal matters."

"Your Eminence misunderstands," Don Joseph replied.

A moment of silence ensued, during which the rain beat hard against the window.

"Well?" the cardinal asked, struck by the tenseness of Don Joseph's face.

"I'm here, Your Eminence, on the most painful errand of my life. My son wants to be a priest."

Cardinal Pignatelli half rose from his chair. "Your son!" he exclaimed. "What son?"

"This one, Your Eminence — the lawyer, fool and madman." Don Joseph shook his head from side to side as if to rid himself of some terrible dream. "What stupidity!"

The cardinal, who had never seen Alphonsus before, now studied him closely. His slight build and unprepossessing appearance suggested nothing of his remarkable reputation. There was, however, an unusual sensitivity in the aquiline nose and delicate curving of the lips. But the face was too thin, the cardinal decided, and too pale to be handsome. It was the face of a scholar, not of one cut out for legal haranguing. "Have you considered the matter sufficiently?" he asked.

"I have, Your Eminence. Long ago God's will for me was clear. Unfortunately I've been slow to accept it."

"God's will for him!" Don Joseph cried out. "He knows God's

will! I suppose his father knows nothing! Had God wanted him to be a priest I'd have trained him for the priesthood. Does he think I've been playing the devil? For God's sake, Your Eminence, open his eyes. Knock this madness out of him. It will kill me!"

The cardinal, feeling both disgust and pity, turned to Alphonsus. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven, Your Eminence."

"Old enough to plan your own life."

"And foolish enough to ruin it," Don Joseph put in. "My oldest son — my heir! That's his vocation — being my heir. Explain to him, Your Eminence; that's his vocation."

The cardinal half extended his hand to the stricken father, as one might gesture to soothe a child. Then he withdrew it. "No, Don Joseph, you demand the impossible."

"It's he who demands the impossible!"

The cardinal played thoughtfully with his pectoral cross and a dreaminess came into his eyes. "I too renounced my rights as eldest son," he said in a softly reminiscent voice. "It was right for me. I can hardly urge your son to the contrary, Don Joseph. In that case both our souls might well be lost. It's true, Don Alphonsus is already enjoying an eminent career. But there's need for eminent churchmen also."

"I've seen enough of careers," Alphonsus said. "I want to be an Oratorian."

The cardinal, still dreaming, made a funnel of the first page of his quinquennial report and poured the blotting sand back into the box.

Don Joseph groaned. "An Oratorian! He doesn't know what he's talking about. He couldn't endure their beds, he couldn't eat their food. In six months he'd be dying of asthma."

"I'm not so sure," the cardinal replied. "Let him try . . ."

"Try!" Don Joseph was horrified. "If he goes, he stays. He's not coming out of any monastery to shame the family."

"You don't need to worry, Father," Alphonsus said.

There was such conviction in his son's voice that Don Joseph

knew he was losing the battle. He therefore decided upon compromise. "Because of his asthma, Your Eminence — if he must be a priest — let him study at home. After ordination he can become chaplain in some private household . . ."

"I want to be an Oratorian," Alphonsus insisted.

Cardinal Pignatelli, who had had a good deal of experience with the vocations of spoiled young noblemen, thought the suggestion sound. "That could be arranged. In fact, it would not be unusual."

"I plan to enter the Oratory," Alphonsus repeated, with more stubbornness than grace in his voice.

"For the present, do as your father suggests," the cardinal advised. "A man of your reputation must move . . . well, with great deliberation, for the sake of the Church as well as for your own."

"But I want . . ."

"What you want doesn't matter," the cardinal said. "Your self-will is poor evidence of a religious vocation."

"I told you so," Don Joseph exclaimed triumphantly. "He has no vocation. Tell him to come home with me and get married."

"I've already made my decision, Don Joseph. He may go home with you and study for the priesthood there."

"At home?" Alphonsus asked.

"At home," the cardinal answered.

It was a partial victory which could not be rejected. "Thank you, Your Eminence." Alphonsus failed to conceal his disappointment. "May I have your blessing?"

He knelt and his father knelt beside him.

The cardinal's blessing lay over them both as they rode up the rainswept avenue toward the mountain. Don Joseph fumed in silence. In fact, Alphonsus was not to hear his voice again for many months. Henceforth, the two men would sleep and wake under the same roof, but they would no longer eat at the same table. The sight of his oldest son in clerical garb was more than Don Joseph could bear.

In spite of the restrictions of life at Marianella, Alphonsus now felt a freedom that he had not known before. Long before the heat of the day, he would return from serving Mass at the village church and be hard at his studies. These were pursued at home under the best ecclesiastical tutors. Since Alphonsus was already a doctor of canon law, he progressed rapidly. His energy seemed inexhaustible, his disposition was unchanging; and when after four months he received minor orders and the tonsure, he knelt in the Church of Our Lady of Ransom to pour out his heart in thanksgiving.

Alphonsus had no intention of becoming a private chaplain, and imperceptibly his dream of the Oratory faded. "It's not what I want that matters," he told himself, remembering the cardinal's reproach. Thus he gradually thought less about the consolations of religious life and more about its obligations. He knew where his gifts lay. He had once used them to win cases in court. Now he must use them to win souls. He must become a preacher.

It was therefore natural that he should turn to the Congregation of Apostolic Missions — or the Neapolitan Propaganda, as it was sometimes called — a group of priests bound together for the purpose of conducting missions. Not demanding community life, the congregation accepted him as a novice. Thereafter he stood against the façades of ugly little churches, whose steps were white with the droppings of pigeons, and taught catechism to filthy, hard-faced children of the slums; or with a group of threadbare companions he walked to outlying villages where priests were few and ignorant. The dust stirred up by bullock carts aggravated his asthma, and his face became so weathered that strangers passing on the road took him for a country-bred curate rather than the son of a Neapolitan nobleman.

He also became a member of the White Fathers, a group of clerics dedicated to bringing spiritual aid to condemned criminals. At night, with the white mantle of the *Bianchi* flung over his shoulders, he penetrated the rat-filled dungeons of Sant'Elmo and the deeper spiritual dungeons of vice that lay within them. Having

dispensed with servants, horses and carriage, he must go to the prison on foot and trudge wearily home with only his religious garb to protect him from thugs and marauders who infested the streets after midnight. He became accustomed to the black stench of poverty and evil; but also to the fresh night air beyond the city, heavy with the fragrance of gardens and sweet with the songs of nightingales. All this, he told himself, was a symbol of the eternal passion of God—the stench and the perfume, the obscenities of men and the voices of birds: suffering and love—never one without the other.

On April 26, 1726, nearly three years after his visit to Cardinal Pignatelli, Alphonsus received his diaconate and with it permission to preach in the city of Naples. His first sermon, given before the Blessed Sacrament during a Forty Hours' Devotion, set everyone talking. "Most young clerics preach well the first time," cynics said, withholding judgment. But as the voice was heard more frequently, the crowds grew. Anticlericals who had respected Alphonsus at the bar came to listen out of curiosity, expecting to hear the learned disquisition of a scholar. They were disappointed, for the one-time lawyer spoke in the plainest terms possible of the simplest things. Fine ladies in wigs and patches, with lovers at their elbows, sought out the church where Alphonsus was preaching. They were hoping for a new diversion. Some affected to scoff. Others went away with no more heart for their love-making.

By the time Alphonsus was ordained, eight months later, the Cardinal Archbishop had rejected Don Joseph's original proposal that his son be made a private chaplain. Neither did he wish to assign so gifted a preacher to any parish. In the end, he permitted Alphonsus to continue living at home, and as a member of the Neapolitan Propaganda, to preach wherever he was asked, in the city of Naples and beyond.

Thus he was also free to continue his work in the slums. There he gathered about him *lazzaroni*, cobblers, barbers, thieves, and prostitutes. On street corners under the starlight he prayed the rosary with them. He composed hymns in the Neapolitan dialect

to replace their ribald songs. A former thief became his acolyte, a murderer was his companion. At Santa Chiara, where half the court gathered to hear him, no one knew that the boy who swung the censer had lately cut his father's throat. Had they been told, at that moment they would scarcely have cared, for Alphonsus was speaking to them not of sin, but of that which transforms sin into love as miraculously as nature transforms the larva into the butterfly.

At Marianella Don Joseph gave no sign that he was aware of his son's new reputation. Being at sea much of the time, he was out of touch with local news. When he returned, he would shut himself in his library to revise his sea maps or prepare government reports. Sometimes he hunted on the estate of Prince Cariata, accompanied by no one but a Moorish slave whom he had picked up on the Leghorn market and had trained in falconry. From such excursions he would return at nightfall with a brace of birds for the cook and a harsh word for Anna Caterina. If Alphonsus passed him in the garden or dared to enter a room where he was present, he would turn and walk away. In time the erosive effect of his choler became perceptible. He moved slowly. He ate less and drank more. He found it necessary to use a dye brush on his hair. In the presence of others he still maintained his military dignity and vigor, but when he was alone he puttered about like an old man.

Meanwhile Alphonsus knelt every day before the Blessed Sacrament to pray for the people of Naples. He prayed particularly for his father who attended Mass on Sunday and received the sacrament without so much as glancing into the canyons of his own soul.

Then shortly before Christmas in the year 1728 Don Joseph rode into Naples to see his lawyer about the unpaid rentals from a vineyard. There was no accounting for his decision. Usually he would have expected his solicitor to come to Marianella and particularly on such a day as this, for the bay was colorless and the landscape as dark as a sparrow's wing. He wore a muffler

around his neck and turned down the flaps of his montero because the north wind was chilly. The Moorish slave, who had neither muffler nor montero, shivered at his heels on a smaller mount and later stood for two hours holding the bridles while his master transacted his business.

By the end of the interview Don Joseph was ill-tempered. Besides, there was a trace of rain in the wind and he regretted the long ride home. Scarcely had they started back when the wind blew harder and the rain increased. Caught in a melee of donkey carts and pedestrians, Don Joseph threatened with his whipstock and punctuated his threats with profanity. The crowd was upset. The gentleman could not be kept waiting. At the same time it was impossible to clear the street. Nevertheless, fishmongers, peasants, and hawkers flattened themselves against one another, a cart was thrust forward and a pack horse was squeezed to the side. Thus a lateral passage was effected, through which Don Joseph and his slave could guide their horses from the center of the street to the gutter. Having done so, they found themselves at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Ghost.

Since the rain was coming down heavily now, Don Joseph decided to seek shelter inside. He dismounted, handed his reins to the slave and entered the vestibule. There he stopped short, for the voice he heard was familiar. Alphonsus was preaching. The vestibule was filled with people — particularly unsavory ones, Don Joseph thought. He tossed a lire to a beggar, deliberately turned his back on a lupus woman and went inside. Although the church was full, he shoved his way down the nave until he found space behind a pillar, where he would be unseen and could still get a clear view of the priest who was speaking.

His first impression was of the smallness of his son, who reminded him of a squirrel ridiculously peering over the edge of a fortress wall into the declivity below. He felt humiliated, disgraced. Then he seemed to be picked up by the spearhead of the voice and held against his will in an alien atmosphere. For a while he struggled like a man in mid-air trying to put his feet

on solid ground. At last, without realizing it, he gave up. He listened. He no longer saw people around him. He scarcely knew where he was. He heard only the words — clear, forceful, simple — yet causing him pain. The pain became more and more intense until he could bear it no longer. At that very moment it receded and deep within him a cord drawn taut for many months snapped and he seemed to be free.

The sermon had come to an end. Music mingled with the shuffle of feet. Don Joseph remained standing by the pillar as the crowd moved slowly out of church. He did not notice that he had dropped his montero. Someone stumbled against it and kicked it to one side, where it was trampled on again, kicked and left like a dust-covered rag.

The acolytes were snuffing the candles when they saw him enter the sacristy. Roughly he pushed aside clusters of young men in surplices until he found Alphonsus kneeling on a *prie-dieu* before a crucifix.

He shook his son by the shoulder. "Alphonsus!"

Alphonsus got up. "Father!"

"My God!" his father sobbed.

Instantly they were in one another's arms.

"I heard you . . . I understand. Forgive me!"

"May the Lord bless you, Father."

Don Joseph sank to his knees. "*Mea culpa, mea culpa,*" he said over and over, while tears flowed down his cheeks.

Alphonsus was happy, although he knew the emotionalism of his father too well to trust this sudden change. Nevertheless, he took the old man's head, with its stiff black queue of dyed hair, and pressed it against his heart.

VI

IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED Don Joseph was busy. He took Anna Caterina to the opera. He went hunting with his friends. He paid his respects to the duke at a court reception. He talked incessantly at the dinner table. Wherever he went he bored everyone with his chatter about the heroism of his oldest son who had been willing to sacrifice his inheritance for the glory of God. He prophesied that Alphonsus would be the next cardinal archbishop of Naples and predicted a general reform in the morals of the whole kingdom. On the Feast of St. Januarius he commented that the liquefaction of the saint's blood was less convincing than the sight of a living saint in action.

On the crest of this wave of enthusiasm Alphonsus found it possible to leave home without creating a family crisis. He moved to the Chinese College.

It stood on a hillside not far from the Ponte della Sanità. Behind its high walls lived a handful of Chinese seminarians whom Father Mateo Ripa had brought with him when, driven out of China by the Emperor Yung Ching, he had made his way to Macao and thence back to Naples. These young men were to form the nucleus of a native clergy, and in anticipation of martyrdom, wore cassocks bound with scarlet.

Since the college was poverty-stricken, no remuneration could be offered to its faculty. Priests willing to serve, however, could live in community, teach the students and at the same time attend to their clerical duties elsewhere in the city. Consequently, Alphonsus continued his connection with the Neapolitan Propaganda. He preached missions in parish churches, he gave retreats to the clergy and to nuns; and wherever he went, his penitents followed

him. They knocked on the door of the Chinese College to ask for his help and they went to confession in the college church. With unkempt hair and tattered clothing, they formed a strange contrast to the neat seminarians who paced back and forth in the orangery telling their beads and who were unaware of the minor miracles that sometimes occurred within their walls.

One Friday afternoon the porter admitted a fat, misshapen woman carrying on her head a basket of cuttlefish. She asked for Alphonsus.

"Tell him it's Mama Ida," she said, putting her basket down and wiping the perspiration from her neck with a wet rag.

Alphonsus came in shortly.

"It's about Rita," the woman explained. "Can't you talk to her, Father? She's worse than ever. I left the younger children with her and she fed them spoiled eels. Of course they were sick. So I beat her. What did the devil do then but run off and spend three days with that pig Mario. Now his wife blames me."

"Is Rita home now?" Alphonsus asked.

"It's not my fault," Mama Ida said. "That big booby of her father's to blame. She sits on her bed all day and makes herself to look like a fine woman."

"Mama Ida," Alphonsus said. "Your daughter should be in a convent!"

"That hussy? Mother of God! She belongs in a bawdyhouse."

"No, Mama Ida. Rita would make a fine nun."

Mama Ida threw back her head and laughed hysterically. "Father, this Chinese place is making you nutty!"

"Go back home," Alphonsus said, "and send Rita to me. Tell her I'll be in the confessional."

An hour later a tall, dark-haired girl wearing gold earrings and a scarlet cloth over her head entered the confessional of the college church.

She enumerated her sins without evincing more than customary remorse, received absolution and went to the altar rail to say her prayers. When Alphonsus emerged from the confessional, she

was still there, holding her hands over her face and sniffing unpleasantly.

As Alphonsus watched her a certitude swept over him which he dared not deny. He went to her. "Rita, you are truly sorry for your sins. I know that."

"Yes, Father."

"And you would like to please God for the rest of your life."

"Oh yes, Father, I would."

"Then cut off your hair and go at once to the Carmelite convent."

"To the convent!" She rose from her knees in amazement. "What for?"

Alphonsus looked at her severely, and when he spoke, the words did not seem to be his own. "To become a nun. That's what God wants."

She started to laugh derisively, but something in the priest's expression checked her. "Why — they wouldn't have me, Father. It's too late for that."

Alphonsus shook his head. "You're mistaken. Men and women aren't born holy, Rita. They become so."

She stared at him, clasping and unclasping her hands behind her. Then she began backing slowly away like a frightened animal. Halfway down the aisle she turned and fled.

The next day Alphonsus stopped at the Convent of the Barefooted Carmelites. He spoke with Rita through a grille. She had cut off her hair and was wearing the black dress of a postulant. Yes, she said, she was very happy. She couldn't understand what had happened after their conversation. She seemed to have been drawn by some force she could not withstand. Yes, her mother was happy too. And Mario? Well, Mario would stay home with his wife now; she would pray for that in particular. Yes, Father, she would pray for that.

Alphonsus returned to the college, offered up his Saturday fast of bread and water in thanksgiving, and met his theology class as casually as if nothing unusual had happened.

At the Chinese College Alphonsus also undertook the mortifications which he dared not practice at home. He put pebbles in his shoes, he scourged himself daily, he sprinkled bitter herbs in his soup, which being made from chicken bones and garlic was unpalatable at best. At the end of a year, worn out from labor and penance, he was sent to a mountain village to rest.

The village, not far south of Naples, was like dozens of others in Campania. It consisted of a central fountain around which were clustered some hovels built of mud and stone. A rocky cartroad led eastward up the mountainside and precipitously southward to the town of Scala and beyond. Every morning the shepherds took their flocks up the road for pasture; every market day they took their donkeys, loaded with ewes' milk cheese, down the road to the coast. On Sundays, although the men remained at home, the women went to Scala to Mass and Alphonsus went with them. Their conversation appalled him. How had the Church failed, he asked himself, that within a short distance from the city of Naples there should be a community steeped in pagan superstition? Were no priests willing to forego the comforts of the city to minister to the mountain people? Sickheartedly he listened to their chatter about love potions peddled by the "wise woman" or witch from the next village, about prenatal omens and amulets against the evil eye. All the mountaineers lived in great fear of the evil eye.

One morning Alphonsus came upon a shepherd who had just butchered his donkey. He stood over the carcass wringing his hands and lamenting. "Poor little *diavolo*! Poor little *diavolo*!"

"Why did you kill him?" Alphonsus asked.

"I dreamed I was riding him down to Scala when he threw me over the cliff. So I had to kill him."

"Because of a dream?"

"Yes, Father. It was a sure sign the evil eye had got him. He'd have taken me to my death. Poor little *diavolo*."

"You might have sold him," the priest suggested.

"It's plain," said the peasant in disgust, "that you don't believe in the evil eye. He'd have killed any man who bought him."

"Just who has this evil eye?" Alphonsus asked.

"No one here, Father, thanks to the ox skull we keep at the fountain. But last week I passed a deaf-mute just above Scala. He stared at the poor beast. He's the one who did it, but I didn't know then."

This was no place for Alphonsus to rest. The next evening he gathered the villagers together by the ox skull and began to teach them. After two weeks some of the men accompanied the women to Sunday Mass. Recognizing them in their sheepskin mantles, Msgr. Nicholas Guerriero, Bishop of Scala, was impressed. He wrote to the Cardinal Archbishop of Naples asking if Alphonsus might return in September and give two missions: one in the cathedral and another to the nuns of the Visitation Convent.

In the interim Alphonsus returned to his own diocese, disconcerted and depressed. It seemed to him now that in all the centuries of the past God's servants had been huddled together in the cities or scattered to the far ends of the earth, without so much as having glanced at the wasteland which lay just beyond their doorstep. Let the young men at the Chinese College continue their work. It was good, Alphonsus knew. But for him there now seemed something more urgent—so urgent, in fact, that he no longer thought with satisfaction of his activities in the slums of Naples. In Naples, wherever one turned a church was waiting with open doors, but in the mountains . . . He wondered if conditions were as bad elsewhere as in the neighborhood of Scala. Well, he would have to find out.

Such was the state of the priest's mind when, back in Scala, on a hot afternoon in September, 1730, he sat in the shade of an olive tree behind the episcopal residence of Msgr. Guerriero. The bishop was quietly fanning himself and taking snuff.

Alphonsus tried to talk to him about the mountaineers. The bishop, however, had something else to discuss.

"You no doubt know about the situation at the Visitation Convent," he said.

Alphonsus did not.

"Surely you've heard of Sister Maria Celeste Crostarosa?"

"I'm sorry, Your Excellency. One can be poorly informed even in the city."

"Perhaps it's just as well. Then you'll go to the convent with an open mind." Beads of perspiration stood all around the edge of the skullcap which crowned the bishop's bald head. He was very warm. "Five years ago Sister Celeste had some revelations — or so she claimed. Nothing very original. The old, familiar story. Our Lord told her to organize the convent under a new rule, which, of course, He dictated, and to adopt a habit like the robe He was wearing at the time. That sort of thing gets to be monotonous, you know." The bishop stopped speaking. For a while he studied the lean, angular features of his guest. Then since the face told him nothing, he asked with some irritation, "What do you think of such fiddle-faddle?"

"It's something I know nothing about, Your Excellency. None of my penitents have had revelations."

The bishop laughed. "You're fortunate. Sister Celeste was still a novice when this happened. Of course the convent was in an uproar. She wrote the whole story to Bishop Falcoia at Castellamare. For years he's been the convent's spiritual director. Falcoia replied by telling her to burn the miraculous rule. Unluckily his letter was delayed. In the meantime, the rule was sent to him. So the secret was out."

"Is the rule a good one?" Alphonsus asked.

The bishop shrugged his shoulders. "You know as well as I how chary one must be of believing women. They are like asphodel in the wind. Hyperemotionalism, a physical constitution which may be overdelicate, delayed adolescence — Frankly, Father Liguori . . ."

Alphonsus interrupted. "You spoke of my going to the convent with an open mind."

"Very well. I'll say no more. At any rate, the supposedly divine rule passed from hand to hand. Theologians, monsignori made a big to-do over it. Meanwhile revelations spread at the convent like a plague. By now our Lord has appeared to at least seven nuns. Sister Celeste, it seems, is faced with competition."

"Or support," Alphonsus put in.

"Finally even the paper on which the rule was written turned out to have miraculous power. A dying Sister was cured by the touch of it." The bishop concluded his story with a small intonation of triumph, as if the final miracle was sufficient to prove everything false. He took a pinch of snuff and when Alphonsus made no comment, he added, "You see, Father, in the cloisters also there are amulets against the evil eye."

Alphonsus did not see. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I'm coming to that in a moment." The bishop snapped his snuffbox closed and resumed his fanning. "After five years of confusion, the situation has not cleared. Most of the nuns want the miraculous rule, a few don't. The clergy is divided. As for myself . . . well, I've lived a long time, my friend, and I've found skepticism safer than credulity."

"But what do you want me to do?" Alphonsus asked again.

"Something rather difficult. I want you to interview every nun at the convent, in private, of course, and also Sister Celeste. And I want you to bring me a report."

The assignment troubled Alphonsus. "But my lack of experience, Your Excellency . . ."

"Never mind that," said the bishop. "The Holy Ghost grants the gift of discernment sparingly. Yet I think he's been remarkably generous to you." He had raised his voice to say the last words because the campanile bells were ringing to call both Alphonsus and the faithful to the mission service.

Within the next ten days Alphonsus interviewed fourteen nuns of the Visitation Convent. Through the grille he asked over and over the same questions in the same tone of voice; and after

each nun left he made notations of what she had said. Finally he called for Sister Celeste.

There was nothing about her appearance to indicate any of the aberrations the bishop had suggested. She was short and somewhat heavy. Her mouth was firm. Her eyes were singularly inexpressive. She answered the priest's questions with the matter-of-factness of a physician giving clinical information. She had answered similar questions many times during the last five years. Her hands alone seemed suited to the artist's conception of a conventional ecstatic. They were white and slender, and she held them spread across her breast like the wings of a dove. It occurred to Alphonsus that her hands should have belonged to someone else, that they were incongruous with her stature and her stolid, practical face.

The conversation between them lasted for a long time. At its conclusion her expression suddenly changed. Her lips trembled, her eyes became vacant, and for a moment she appeared to be not a living person but a shell—a body completely emptied of itself. Her hands, which had not moved during the whole interview, now slowly made the sign of the cross.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," she said in a voice which was both restrained and intense, "I have told you nothing but the truth. I have written into the new rule only what was given to me. I know that I kneel between hell and heaven, that everything I have said will reach the judgment seat of God."

"You may go now," Alphonsus said.

The nun, however, did not move. She looked searchingly at her inquisitor. "You haven't told me whether or not you believe."

"That is something I must tell first to the bishop. You may go."

A look of pain crossed her face. "Without your blessing?" she asked dully.

"No, with my blessing."

Alphonsus blessed her. "Go in peace and commend yourself to God," he said.

When he returned to the episcopal residence, Alphonsus found the bishop far more amiable than he had expected. Apparently his earlier skepticism had been a matter of expediency. He walked up and down the little garden, fluttering his fan and saying, "That's what I feared. That's just what I feared. It's unfortunate it had to happen in my diocese. Revelations are such a nuisance to the Church, you know. But your opinion concurs with a good many others. If Sister Celeste were living in the world, I'm afraid she'd be no romantic dreamer, but something as uninteresting as a seller of onions. The matter has been in abeyance long enough. With your help, it's going to be concluded."

Therefore on Pentecost Sunday, May 13, 1731, the Visitation nuns formally became the Sisters of the Most Holy Savior, more commonly known as the Redemptoristines. Henceforth Alphonsus was to visit them frequently.

VII

AS ALPHONSUS' SUCCESS AT SCALA became known, he was asked more and more frequently to give retreats at convents in Naples. Thus another activity was added to his already overcrowded life. During the summer months, which were so hot that the serins perched with bills open and wings extended, Alphonsus went tirelessly from cloister retreats to parish missions, from parish missions to street preaching in the slums, and from the slums back to the classroom at the Chinese College. Rain that season had been insufficient. The leaves behind the walled gardens hung limp and dusty. The field poppies drooped. Day after day the plume of Vesuvius rose heavenward against a cloudless sky. As the oppressive sultriness became more ominous, Neapolitans looked uneasily at the volcano and from time to time they spoke of "earthquake weather."

But the volcano remained quiet and the earthquake occurred not in Naples but to the northeast in the Apulian plain. Nevertheless, many years later Alphonsus would remember that summer as portentous of two events which, in the autumn, happened almost simultaneously and were to cause both the sufferings and the triumphs of his life.

The first of these followed upon the death of Antonio Farnese, Duke of Parma, whose family had ruled that duchy for two hundred years. Since the duke was childless, succession had been promised by European treaty to Don Carlos of Bourbon, the son of Philip of Spain by his second wife, Elisabeth Farnese. Therefore, in October, 1731, the sixteen-year-old prince set sail from Barcelona with six thousand Spanish troops and a month later disembarked at Leghorn. At the command of the Austrian emperor, the Neapolitan galleys stood off to sea. Don Joseph was with them, secretly

glad that Spanish blood had returned to Italy and little guessing that four years later Don Carlos would conquer Naples and thenceforth be a wellspring of trouble for Alphonsus.

The other event occurred at Scala. The first news of it reached Alphonsus in a letter from the superior of the convent, who wrote him on October 25:

Sister Maria Celeste and Sister Columba have something to write to you about an important matter, but they have not yet obtained the permission of holy obedience.

Shortly afterward he received an even more mysterious message from Msgr. Thomas Falcoia, Bishop of Castellamare:

When I come to Naples I must speak to you of a very important work to be done in which you are in some way concerned.

Alphonsus did not wait. He obtained permission to go at once to Scala and, having made his presence known to the superior of the convent, left word that Sister Celeste would find him in the confessional.

He waited there for some time. Then he heard the soft, quick footsteps of the nun, the opening and closing of a door. He prayed for a moment in silence.

"I have permission to tell you everything, Father," Sister Celeste whispered with her customary matter-of-factness. "Our Lord has come to me again and has given me another rule."

"Another rule?" Alphonsus hesitated. "Sister, what has happened to you? God does not rescind His commands."

"I know, Father. It's not for our Order—it's a rule for an order of men."

A pause followed this statement. Alphonsus was shocked. Was Sister Celeste suffering from delusions? How could a cloistered nun organize an institute of men—particularly in a village like Scala, which was little more than a staircase cut into the rocks of the mountainside? Were her novices to come from the handful of boys who played on the steps? Was she to choose Paolo, who

each morning led a nanny goat from door to door until the housewives had milked her dry? "What are these men to do?" he finally asked, and his voice sounded harsh.

"They're to work among the shepherds in the mountains."

"There's need of such work," Alphonsus admitted. "How will you do it?"

"If I haven't been asked, Father."

"Oh." Again Alphonsus waited, but the nun did not continue.

"The bishop perhaps?"

"No, Father, not the bishop."

"Come now, Sister, who is to found this institute?"

He could hear Sister Celeste draw in her breath quickly.

"You are."

Alphonsus was stunned. "Not I," he said.

"Yes, Father."

"Sister Celeste, you are mistaken. I'm already doing my work."

Alphonsus was annoyed by the preposterousness of the suggestion. It was true, he had believed the earlier revelations when he had listened to her in full daylight and had been persuaded by the frank simplicity of her face. Now in darkness, hearing the sibilants characteristic of the confessional, he was beset by disbelief. "I think, Sister, you'd best forget this new revelation. It is not from God."

It was her turn now to sound severe. "Then I shall tell the Lord that you refuse."

"Tell the Lord nothing, Sister, and speak to no one about the matter."

"But I've been commanded . . ."

Alphonsus interrupted. "You have an obligation to doubt the revelation. St. Teresa herself said she never believed any visions firmly enough to swear it was God who spoke to her. Do you think yourself better than she?"

"No, Father."

"Then never mention this matter again."

"But if our Lord tells me . . ."

"Teresa obeyed her confessor even when his advice was contrary to her visions."

"I know," Sister Celeste said. "I am under obedience to my confessor."

"Very well then. The matter is closed."

"But, Father . . ."

"Yes?"

"You are not my confessor."

It was the truth. The nuns of the convent regularly confessed to a canon of the cathedral, but for some time Sister Celeste's spiritual director had been Bishop Falcoia. The priest felt trapped. The matter was so distasteful to him that he could scarcely bear to continue the conversation. Nevertheless, with a deep sigh he said, "Then tell me, if you must, exactly what happened. First, when did you receive this revelation?"

"On the vigil of the Feast of St. Francis."

"Where were you at the time?"

"In chapel."

"Were you suffering from any drowsiness?"

"No, Father. I was wide awake."

"And what happened?"

"Our Lord appeared, just as He has before, bathed in light. On one side of Him was St. Francis. You stood on the other . . ."

"Impossible, Sister. You have had a dream."

"No, Father. It was no dream."

A terrible fear seized Alphonsus. Perspiration broke out on his forehead. "I don't believe you!" he cried. At that moment he was stricken by a paroxysm of asthma.

Unaware of what was happening on the other side of the grille, Sister Celeste continued speaking. "Christ indicated you and said, 'He has been chosen to head my institute and to be the first superior. After that . . .'"

The asthmatic seizure had become so intense that Alphonsus in his struggle for breath flung back the curtain.

Thinking that she had been rudely dismissed, Sister Celeste rose from her knees and, without daring to speak, left the confessional.

Alphonsus remained until the paroxysm subsided. When he was able to make his way to the bishop's house, he was still gasping for breath.

The following day he said nothing of what had happened, although his state of agitation was apparent. He was unable to eat. When he tried to walk he staggered slightly, and the bishop asked if he was suffering from indigestion. At last he was forced to confess the story and furthermore to admit that he had not heard Sister Celeste to the end.

"You must go back," the bishop urged. You must go back and demand that Sister Celeste show you this new rule." Then he relented, recognizing that Alphonsus was truly ill. "No, I'll go for you."

The following day at the Scala convent Bishop Guerriero read the rule which Sister Celeste claimed had been revealed to her. It was a plan for an institute of men devoted to imitating Christ in His charity and to preaching to the poor. The daily spiritual exercises, like those practiced by the nuns, were drawn up according to twelve monthly virtues. The bishop was impressed.

"I don't understand," he said to Alphonsus, "why you're so upset. You've already been thinking about preaching to the shepherds. You mentioned it to me last year. Now the Lord says 'Go ahead' and you rebel."

They were sitting in the bishop's study — Alphonsus with his elbows on the desk and his head between his hands. "I'm quite willing, Your Excellency, to preach to the shepherds . . . but not under circumstances like these."

"How could the circumstances be better?"

"I can't work under the ridiculous presumption that God stood between St. Francis and me and spoke such words. That claim is proof that the revelations are fraudulent."

"But why?"

Alphonsus raised his head and looked the bishop full in the

face. "I'll tell you the truth, Your Excellency. Then you'll understand. Because all my life I've been a stupid, bullheaded, pampered Neapolitan aristocrat. I overcame my natural tendency to anger by exchanging it for the sin of pride. I held my own father in judgment when I should have loved him. I came to feel contempt for the class of society into which I was born, but I've also felt some contempt for the less privileged classes as well. I have nothing to offer God but success in the things that do not matter and failure in those that do. He would never choose me to found a religious order; and if He did, my influence would be enough to insure its failure."

"You judge yourself differently than others do."

Alphonsus flushed. "I know. I'm popular. God gave me a first-rate mind and the gift of eloquence. I thank Him for those gifts. They dazzle the public and perhaps they do some good. I don't quarrel with what He's given me, but only with what I've given Him in return."

"Now He's asking for something more in return. Are you going to refuse Him that as well?"

"Must I believe in visions?"

The bishop smiled. "Really, Father, you're inconsistent. It was you who persuaded me to believe in those visions in the first place."

"I know."

"For the present," the bishop said, "wait in patience. Meanwhile we'll pray."

From Scala Alphonsus went to Castellamare to see Bishop Falcoia, who, as founder of the convent and Sister Celeste's spiritual director, would surely have something to say. He found that Falcoia had already read the rules for the proposed institute and was filled with enthusiasm.

"Did not Christ tell us that God could raise children of Abraham from stones?" Falcoia asked. "Are you of poorer substance than a stone?"

From Castellamare Alphonsus returned to Naples. He went to see his childhood confessor, Father Pagano.

"This has been inspired by God," Father Pagano said.

It was no use, Alphonsus thought. Everyone judged him by his reputation, and much as he tried, he could not make them realize the basic shabbiness of his soul. Still he did not give up. He approached Father Cutica of the House of the Vincentians, where as a layman he had made retreats. Then wanting advice from someone who had never known him, he consulted Father Manulio, Neapolitan Provincial of the Jesuits. The answers were all the same. He decided to spend a year in prayer.

Alphonsus could not, of course, move out of his own diocese without the permission of Pignatelli, the Cardinal Archbishop, and it was not likely that Pignatelli would wish to sacrifice any priest, particularly one who was devoting himself to work among the poor. Alphonsus therefore expected the whole issue to be closed by episcopal authority. At first the cardinal seemed to confirm this expectation. He was, however, a good man who had at heart the welfare of the whole Church. Consequently the opinions of others soon prevailed upon him to such an extent that he urged Alphonsus to undertake the new work.

Meanwhile Alphonsus continued his activities for both the Neapolitan Propaganda and the Chinese College. In February, at the request of the bishop, he went to Foggia to preach a novena in the cathedral church. It was a long trip, northeast almost as far as the Adriatic Sea, and its destination lay in the neighborhood which had been ravaged by earthquake the preceding year. The cathedral itself had been partially destroyed. The north projection of the transept had been reduced to a pile of rubble. Apse and nave, however, remained intact, and the picture of the Blessed Virgin, to which the people of Foggia attached miraculous power, still hung unharmed over the Lady Altar. There at the close of each novena service Alphonsus knelt

and prayed for guidance. One by one the worshipers would leave, and at last the sacristan, impatient to lock the doors for the night, would shuffle about making half-hearted gestures to extinguish the lights. Once, however, he stood stock still in the dimly illuminated church, struck with amazement. Alphonsus seemed to be talking to someone. His head was turned toward the miraculous picture, and his voice was so low that the sacristan could not catch the words. He didn't seem to be speaking to the picture, and yet . . .

Suddenly the sacristan rushed out of the church. He bumped into a group of old grannies gossiping on the steps. "It's a miracle!" he cried. "I saw it!"

He answered their questions breathlessly and ran down the street to spread the news.

By the time Alphonsus left the church it was already dark outside. The old grannies were waiting for him—shriveled little women with black shawls over their heads.

"We saw what happened, Father," one of them said. And to Alphonsus' horror, she reached for his cincture and kissed it.

Almost roughly he shook her off. "For shame, *ava mia!*" In the moonlight he could see her sharp eyes and toothless smile.

"It's true," said another. "The sacristan told us. We went back into the church and we saw!"

"Saw what?" Alphonsus asked.

"The miracle! We all saw the miracle!"

Alphonsus' face became rigid. Then he noticed that a crowd had gathered some distance away. People were milling about, shouting and laughing, and some of the men carried flares which revealed the bright colors of their caps and scarves. "There must be a festival," he commented.

"No, Father. They've all heard about the miracle," the first grannie said.

"What miracle are you talking about?" the priest asked crossly. The crowd down the street had begun singing.

"About our Lady speaking to you."

"Hush, *ava mia!*" Alphonsus said. "That is no miracle. Our Lady speaks to anyone who's willing to listen."

But the old woman continued to stare at him with shining wonder in her eyes. "You don't deny it! You can't! We saw, Father. A great blessing has come to Foggia."

A group of men had detached themselves from the crowd and were on their way to the church. Alphonsus kept his eyes upon the men. "There's only one blessing, granny. The blessing that comes from a good life. Tell the people that I want them to go home to bed."

The men were now quite close, but by making an abrupt turn around the side of the cathedral, the priest escaped them.

By the time Alphonsus returned to Naples, Father Mateo Ripa of the Chinese College, and Canon Torni, head of the Neapolitan Propaganda, had learned of the events at Scala.

Canon Torni was a practical administrator who had small patience with that he termed "mystical rubbish." "You seem to forget," he said to Alphonsus, "that you're a member of the Neapolitan Propaganda. Your work has been fruitful and you've no right to abandon it."

Alphonsus protested. "I've made no decision to abandon anything. Besides, I've taken no vows which bind me to the Propaganda."

"But can't you see," the canon declared, "you're creating a scandal by listening to the imaginings of a silly little nun."

"I'm sorry for the scandal," Alphonsus replied. "As for the nun . . . If I decide to leave Naples, it won't be because of any revelations. I've no cause to think God has singled me out. I'll go only because the mountain people are in need and because my spiritual advisers have urged me."

Father Mateo Ripa was even more inconsolable than Canon Torni. "You've lost your mind!" he complained, pacing back and forth in the orangery, shaking his head. "You were the rock on which I built the Chinese College."

"Nonsense!" Alphonsus cried. "Your college was built before I ever came to it."

"Nevertheless, you were called to martyrdom in China or wouldn't have come." Father Ripa stopped pacing and turned accusingly to Alphonsus. "You're giving up your vocation."

"I'm not giving up anything yet, Father. Suppose I do leave, nothing will happen here. I teach a few classes. I'm under no vows. Naples is full of priests who are better teachers than I."

"Perhaps. But do you think they'd come here and live on bread and onion soup?"

Alphonsus laughed outright. "You forget that we had a shoulder of kid at Easter."

"You needn't laugh. We can't get along without you."

"Really, Father, one man isn't that important."

"Two are."

"But I'm only one."

"Father Liguori, don't pretend. You persuaded him yourself."

"Persuaded whom?" Alphonsus was surprised. "What are you talking about?"

"About your taking Father Mannarini with you."

"I? I'm not taking anyone."

"He's already told me that if you go, he's going with you."

"It's the first I've heard of it. I'll forbid him to leave."

"Don't bother," Father Ripa replied. "I've already told him to go."

The news that Father Vincent Mannarini intended to join Alphonsus was encouraging. He was not, however, an easy man to work with, for he was self-willed, critical, and impatient. Never mind, Alphonsus thought, such matters rest in the hands of God. That anyone would help was sufficient cause for thanksgiving.

At Marianella, Anna Caterina was sympathetic. She felt confident that whatever Alphonsus did accorded with the will of God. Nothing else mattered. Don Joseph, however, refused to see his son. For the past few years he had kept his peace, content to enjoy his son's increasing reputation as a preacher and con-

fidant that he would soon be made a prelate. Now it appeared his dreams would come to nothing. For some weeks his silence persisted. Then he unexpectedly appeared at the Chinese College.

"Why did I beget such sour fruit?" he cried, standing in the center of the guest room and thoughtlessly raising his voice so that it reached into the garden where the seminarians were taking their recreation. "Haven't I done my part? I let you give up everything to become a priest. Now, when you might be a canon of the cathedral or a bishop, you throw away all your prospects on a madcap scheme like this."

"I became a priest because I wanted to throw myself away," Alphonsus said.

"What good will your education serve you in the mountains? Let country bumpkins teach their own kind. I'd rather have you a stone breaker on the public roads."

For three hours Don Joseph stormed. In the end Alphonsus watched him go away, a defeated old man.

The rainy season passed. In the narrow alleys of Naples a stench rose from the sewers, but on the hillsides the vineyards turned green and wild cyclamen burst into bloom. Then the heat of midsummer settled over the countryside. The scorpions crawled under stones and went to sleep. The onion fields dried up, and Alphonsus remembered his advice to Sister Celeste: Obey your confessor. Consequently, in August he made another trip to Castellamare and put himself under obedience to Bishop Falcoia. When he returned, his mind was made up and he felt new courage. Nevertheless, he was bound to remain in Naples until his year of waiting had passed. As the time drew near he became more and more impatient. "I am dying with the desire to set out," he wrote Falcoia.

During the first week of November that desire was satisfied. It was still dark when Alphonsus rose and said Mass in the college chapel. Then quietly he packed one small bag, and without trusting himself to say good-by to anyone, he left the Chinese

College on foot. Although the distance to Scala was only twenty miles, on that morning traveling was hard. The first raw wind of the season was sweeping across the bay, bringing with it a cold rain. Alphonsus' cloak was soon soaked, but he did not notice. He sloshed through puddles unaware of them. He forgot to eat. Not once did he look back upon the city of Naples.

VIII

IN A LITTLE GUEST HOUSE which stood on the grounds of the convent at Scala, Alphonsus spent four days and four nights in prayer. There, while rain beat against the roof, he offered Mass at an improvised altar and there he lived on bread and water. He had shaken the dust of Naples from his sandals, he thought, and in doing so he expected to find the peace that comes from confidence in God alone. Instead he found only trouble.

Bishop Guerriero had died a few months before. Although the prelate who supplanted him was sympathetic, he and Alphonsus had not yet met. Furthermore, a strange unrest had penetrated the convent like wind sweeping through the branches of a tree. The nuns, with frightened or ecstatic faces, whispered about miracles. They claimed that during Benediction the cross had repeatedly appeared on the Sacred Host, surrounded by circles which bore the instruments of the passion of Christ. They reminded Alphonsus that all of Sister Celeste's revelations had prophesied suffering and trial. Alphonsus, with his customary good sense, bade them be silent. He tried to shut his own ears to everything he heard. But doubts assailed him. He wondered if the alleged apparition was a promise of suffering and trial or an evidence of community delusion.

There was no one to whom he could turn, since strangest of all, a change had also come over Sister Celeste. Now all her decisions were made, it seemed, according to the advice which she received from Don Salvatore Tosquez. "But Bishop Falcoia is your spiritual director," Alphonsus reminded her again and again. It was to no avail.

Don Salvatore Tosquez, who had suddenly become so important in her life, was one of Alphonsus' recruits. He was a young Nea-

politan attorney and a diplomat of some distinction. Furthermore, according to his own judgment, he was deeply versed in mysticism. Early in the year Alphonsus had sent him to Bishop Falcoia for approval. From Castellamare he had gone directly to the convent to obtain firsthand knowledge about the revelations and had made an indelible impression upon Sister Celeste. Now when Alphonsus tried to discuss plans with her, the same words came habitually through the grille: "But Don Salvatore thinks . . ." or "Don Salvatore suggests . . ." Alphonsus bore these references with outward patience; yet remembering the nun's delicate hands and her plain practical face, he wondered if their incongruity was symbolic of two irreconcilable facets of her nature.

During those four days alone in the guest house he had to tell himself many times that even as God had chosen him in spite of his limitations; so He had also chosen Sister Celeste. Each was under trial, each was capable of error and disaffection. They were like acrobats he had once seen walking a tightrope in Naples. What perfect balance was necessary! With such thoughts weighing heavily on his mind, he renewed his mortifications and prayers.

On the fifth day Father Mannarini arrived, bringing with him a friend, Father John Baptist Donato. Two days later Father Peter Romano knocked on the door and begged to be admitted. He was a canon of the Scala cathedral and confessor to the nuns.

These were the four men who gathered together on November 9 to offer a Mass to the Holy Ghost, sing the *Te Deum* and dedicate themselves to imitating their Redeemer among the most neglected souls in the Kingdom of Naples. On the day of this dedication a letter lay in Alphonsus' room. It was from Salvatore Tosquez, who had been unavoidably delayed.

The following week in Naples, a layman by the name of Vitus Curtius was packing his valise, with his back turned to the Marquis of Vasto.

"You've lost your mind," the marquis was saying to him. "You're

no priest. What have you to gain by giving up everything here?"

Vitus, who was the marquis' secretary, repeated the only explanation he knew. "I've told you already, my lord. I had a dream . . . "

"Which proves only that the wines of Bordeaux give you indigestion."

The secretary ignored the comment. He seemed to be speaking to himself. "I was climbing up a steep cliff and a stranger was helping me . . . someone I had never seen before. Yet the face was so clear that I could not forget it. Two weeks ago a man passed me in the street. It was the same face, my lord . . . Alphonsus Liguori's face. I must go to Scala."

The Marquis scoffed. "You'll be back soon enough. By the devil, Vitus, not once since you've been in my household have you received the Eucharist; and a good many times you dared not."

"That is very true, my lord." Vitus closed his valise and turned around. "God willing, I shall receive the sacrament at Scala." With these words he walked out of the room, down the wide corridor of the marquis' residence and into the unknown world.

He traveled on foot along the mule path used by peasants bringing their produce to market. By late afternoon he reached the vineyards which for centuries had been growing over the still undiscovered ruins of Pompeii. There he sat down under a mulberry tree, drank from his wine jug and ate his bread and cheese. A boy came by driving a herd of goats. Later a woman trudged down the path with a bundle of faggots strapped across her back. By the time he resumed his journey it had begun to rain. Some miles farther on he was overtaken by a man riding a black horse. The horse was a barb stallion. Its trappings were expensive and so was the apparel of its rider. Since gentlemen of such affluence seldom rode unaccompanied Vitus Curtius watched curiously until prevented by a bend in the path.

At Scala a girl with a water jug on her head directed him to the convent. When he arrived, he was surprised to find the

barb stallion just inside the gate. It belonged to Don Salvatore Tosquez.

Alphonsus and the group of men living in the guest house had drawn up and were following a strict *Modus vivendi*. They had bound themselves to lives of extreme mortification. They all wore hair shirts and other instruments of penance. They spent much time in prayer, convinced of the importance of the work they were about to undertake. But they also spent time around the parlor table discussing the new organization and the constitutions that would govern it. Since the rule revealed to Sister Celeste was only ascetical, Alphonsus had been corresponding with Bishop Falcoia as to how it could be applied to the practical problems of the new institute. At the same time, certain matters must be left to community decision. Unfortunately, the men to whom this task fell were already mature, set in their ways, and unaccustomed to compromise.

Upon the means of their sanctification, they were agreed. These were to be charity, love of God, and zeal for souls, characterized by a willingness to suffer and by a special devotion to the humanity of Christ in His incarnation, passion, and death. They also agreed that their devotions must be reinforced by daily mortification, self-contempt, and the acceptance of insults and privations. That was all.

When Alphonsus referred to the purpose of the new institute as "the preaching of retreats and missions to the poor," Mannarini objected.

"If we limit our purpose now, we'll be handicapped later," he said. "I think we should also maintain schools."

Alphonsus was taken aback. "Father Mannarini," he protested, "it was never intended that we should become educators."

Father Donato, however, agreed with Mannarini. "Schools will save us from impoverishment. No order can support itself merely by preaching to the poor."

"The Lord must have intended us to be educators," Tosquez put in. "Why else did He choose men of education?"

"But you joined me," Alphonsus insisted, "with a full understanding that our work would be preaching to the poor."

"Of course we'll preach missions," Mannarini assured him. "No one is objecting to that."

Alphonsus stood up, as if he were either in the law court or in the pulpit. "I urge you," he said emphatically, "to go to the mountains . . . to the villages which no priest has ever entered. Thousands of herdsmen have never been inside a church. They live like animals. Their wives petition Our Lady for curses on their neighbors. Their children . . ."

"Never mind," Father Donato interrupted. "We know all that."

Alphonsus sat down. He lowered his voice. "We can't face such responsibility with divided interests."

Father Romano, who had lived many years in Scala and knew the situation, agreed.

But Tosquez, always ready with an answer, dissented. "The Benedictines maintain schools and parish churches, and they preach missions as well. The Dominicans, founded to be an order of mendicants, became the great schoolmen of the Middle Ages."

"I think," said Alphonsus, "none of us would claim to be either Benedict or Dominic. We're simply six men of good will."

"And of different talents," Mannarini added, "like the disciples at Pentecost. Diverse gifts demand a diversity of work."

At that point Vitus Curtius got up to ring the vesper bell and the meeting came to an end.

Alphonsus was grateful for the peace of chapel. He began to wonder why these men had joined him since their interests seemed so opposed to his own. If they were rebellious now, how would they persevere when difficulties—even failure perhaps—had worn their enthusiasm thin? Was this only a passing temptation? If so, would it leave antagonisms in its wake?

That evening at recreation Father Donato said, "It's quite all right to say the office in common now; but once we're at work, it won't be possible."

Alphonsus shook his head. "Surely, Father, you know that com-

munity prayer is the lifeblood of an institute. Once it's dispensed with, religious fervor dies, and the reading of prayers in private becomes no more than an irritating chore."

Donato shrugged and gave Mannarini a glance which wrung Alphonsus' heart.

The days passed and the wrangling continued. The men argued about the color and design of their habits. They quarreled over the interpretation of poverty. Tosquez, who had not yet disposed of his barb stallion, believed that community poverty meant personal destitution. He spoke in glowing terms of the first Franciscans who begged for their daily bowl of soup. Alphonsus reminded him that the shepherds, who had scarcely enough soup to nourish their own children, could ill afford to share it with beggars. Vitus Curtius waggishly remarked that no religious order could be maintained on soup alone. It was the first time he had spoken in meeting. Tosquez was annoyed. In Naples Vitus Curtius had enjoyed no reputation for piety. He would do well to hold his tongue.

Fortunately the priests had already been asked to give a number of missions. As a consequence, the tension of the house was eased from time to time by temporary absences. Occasionally all the priests were gone. Then Vitus Curtius and Salvatore Tosquez were left alone together. At such times the former, without being asked, assumed the duties of a servant. He prepared the meals, he did the laundry, he swept the cottage, while Tosquez spent much of his time at the convent, deep in conversation with Sister Celeste. Eventually those conversations bore fruit.

Sister Celeste, who had originally been agreeable to asking Bishop Falcoia's aid in amplifying the rule, now began to complain of his meddling. If he accepted her revelations, she claimed, he should not presume to improve upon God's plan. If he doubted them, he should never have urged Alphonsus to come to Scala. The argument appealed to Fathers Mannarini and Donato. They were willing to accept the authority of Alphonsus, or so they stated, but only if he dispensed with the bishop's interference. The bishop, mean-

while, remained at Castellamare, among the exhausting duties of his diocese. From there he wrote frequently to Scala, reporting his progress with the rule, making suggestions, and above all encouraging Alphonsus with his love and trust.

Sister Celeste remained scornful of Falcoia's reports. She accused him of incompetence and began to belittle his spiritual direction. "He's always misunderstood me," she told Alphonsus, little guessing how clear the picture was to the man who heard her: Salvatore Tosquez, his face intent and his voice sympathetic, speaking softly into the grille, saying, "My dear Sister, Bishop Falcoia has never understood you. What does he know of mystics? You will never achieve sanctity under his direction, for you are a soul peculiarly chosen by God." With an act of will, Alphonsus blotted out the picture.

The day came, however, when Sister Celeste made her decision. Alphonsus met her in the confessional. He listened to her long list of complaints against Falcoia and her conclusion: "As long as he is my spiritual director, he will seek to control your institute and its members will be denied the liberty they need. For the good of the institute, I have therefore decided I must give up my director, even though he is a holy man."

Through years of discipline at Marianella, Alphonsus had learned forbearance. But in the law courts he had also learned to use strong words when they were needed. He knew they were needed now. "You distrust Bishop Falcoia," he said bluntly, "because he has humbled you. Surely you know, Sister, that any director of good conscience is zealous to keep his souls in a state of humility. Tosquez is the man you should distrust because he feeds your pride."

He could not see that the face under the coif turned white and the eyes, usually so prosaic, flashed with indignation. "You are unjust, Father!"

Alphonsus went on. "Tosquez is no priest. He is no spiritual director. He approves you in everything. He claims that you are greater than St. Teresa, and like a giddy girl you have let his

personality and persuasion beguile you. You cling to him as no nun should cling to any man. I don't say there is sin in this. I know the bond between you is spiritual, but there should be no bond at all. There is one sacrifice you must make. Otherwise all the grace that was given you will be withdrawn. You must give up Tosquez."

"What you are asking is impossible." Sister Celeste kept her voice low, but its tenseness was the measure of her fury. "You are misjudging everything!"

"Believe me, Sister, I am not! If you follow Falcoia, you will become a saint. If you follow Tosquez, God alone knows if you will even save your soul."

Alphonsus could hear the quick movement, the caught breath. He waited a moment, but she made no move to reply. In the end, he felt certain that she was unequal to the task he had set for her.

Alphonsus knew that it lay within his power to dismiss Tosquez, and in fact to dismiss the others as well. Yet such a course of action appeared disastrous. They had come together for a common purpose. That purpose was the indestructible foundation on which their organization would be built. On that, they did not disagree. With regard to all other matters, Alphonsus felt confident, some agreement could eventually be reached.

With the coming of advent, however, it seemed to Alphonsus that the little house at Scala was sadly like the inn of Bethlehem. There was no room in it for Christ. Everyone was so busy arguing how best to serve Him that the door remained locked against His birth. Masses were offered, prayers were said in common, and Christmas was celebrated with a suckling pig and *Lacrima Christi* wine, which Guerriero's successor, Bishop Santoro, sent over for the feast day. The disagreements persisting for so long had by now culminated in bitterness. The only man unaffected by the discord was Vitus Curtius. He was always ready with a word of kindness or an act of

charity, and more than once his sly humor broke a tension which otherwise might have been disastrous. Alphonsus, who had recently made a vow never to abandon his purpose except under obedience to his spiritual adviser, continued to be both patient and obdurate.

From Epiphany until Lent discussions regarding the formation of the institute were suspended, for the priests were occupied in preaching missions. On Shrove Tuesday, however, they all returned — in good spirits, Alphonsus thought, and a new wave of confidence swept over him. The next day, when the mark of ashes was still upon them, he begged for a renewal of their prayers to the Holy Ghost that the deadlock might be broken. Thus Lent began in comparative peace.

Good Friday fell on the first of April. Spring was already far advanced. The crocuses had bloomed and faded, the air was heavy with the fragrance of rosemary and the awakened earth seemed symbolic of a spiritual resurrection.

Behind the convent enclosure, hidden among underbrush and trees, a narrow footpath led up the hillside to a cliff which overlooked both the village and the Bay of Amalfi. Alphonsus had come upon it by chance one day, thinking at first that it led only to a dead end. Later he discovered a fork which brought him to a small cave. It must have been used at some time, for just outside the entrance lay the blackened stones of an improvised oven, and inside were the shards of a wine jug and a broken, three-legged stool. During the difficult days at Scala both cave and cliff provided Alphonsus with a secret place of retreat. It was here that he went on the morning of Good Friday to meditate on the Passion of Christ. The bay was a sparkling blue, stretching unbroken from shore to horizon, for on that day no fishing boats were launched; but sea birds flecked the sky above the water. Even the Passion was rich with the expectancy of an Easter dawn.

When Alphonsus returned, the noon angelus was ringing. He stopped at the convent gate to repeat the prayers, then started

for the guest house and suddenly found himself face to face with Mannarini, Donato, and Tosquez. They carried traveling bags.

"Father, we're leaving," Mannarini said.

"Leaving!" Alphonsus was bewildered. "There are no missions until after Easter."

"I know, Father. We're leaving the institute." He glanced uneasily at Father Donato.

"All of you?" It was hard for Alphonsus to bring himself from the world of meditation to this unexpected reality.

The men nodded.

"I'm sure you'll find it for the best," Tosquez said. "If we can't come to any agreement in five months, we'll never be able to."

"There's no personal feeling," Donato added with too much reassurance. "What you need, Father, are younger men than we."

"I take the men whom God sends me," Alphonsus replied. "Let's go into the house and talk the matter over."

The men looked uncomfortably at one another. It was evident that they were eager to be on their way.

"There's no need to talk," Tosquez said. "We've been talking for months."

"And praying," said Mannarini. "You asked us to pray to the Holy Ghost, and this, Father, is what He wants us to do."

"Are you sure?" Alphonsus asked.

"Yes, very sure."

"He wants you to go away?"

"Yes, Father."

"To give up the work for which He chose you?"

"Oh no," Tosquez said, "we shan't give up the work."

Alphonsus shook his head. "Then I don't understand. Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"We're going to start a religious order," Tosquez explained.

"That's what we're doing here," Alphonsus said.

"But we want schools, Father. You know that. We want schools . . . and . . ." The sentence trailed into silence.

Alphonsus looked at them one by one, with a glance so filled

with love and sorrow that they dropped their eyes. "I see."

They stood clutching their traveling bags and glancing furtively toward the gate, like prisoners planning an escape.

Then all at once Alphonsus dropped to his knees. "Father Mannarini," he said, "give me your blessing before you go."

The gesture was so unexpected that Father Mannarini turned red. Nevertheless, he blessed Alphonsus.

"And you too, Father Donato."

Father Donato made the sign of the cross over Alphonsus.

When Alphonsus rose, they in turn knelt for the blessing of the man whom they were leaving. Tosquez, however, remained standing.

"God knows we tried," Mannarini remarked apologetically.

"Of course," Alphonsus answered. "God knows everything."

All night on Good Friday Alphonsus knelt before the empty tabernacle. For a long time Father Romano also remained in chapel, but finally overcome with weariness, he went to bed. Vitus Curtius, however, stayed, drowsing from time to time, then waking with miserable thoughts about the Apostles who had slept in Gethsemani. Just before dawn Alphonsus became aware of his presence.

"Have you been here all night?" he asked.

Vitus Curtius nodded.

"Then go to bed."

Alphonsus was left alone, feeling the peace of Holy Saturday morning as he had never known it before. Out of the agony of his disappointment was born a gratitude that God had allowed him to share so deeply in His Passion. Surely he would share in the Resurrection too.

But not that year.

After Mass on Easter Sunday Father Romano said, "I can be of some use at the cathedral. Here neither of us can do anything."

"We can pray," Alphonsus suggested.

Father Romano, however, was convinced the defection of their companions had brought the whole project to an end. "It is

better not to pray against the will of God," he said flatly and took his leave.

On Easter Friday a letter came from Cardinal Pignatelli:

We are advised that three of your companions have returned to Naples and that the only priest who now remains with you is a canon of Scala cathedral. We are therefore obliged to put you under obedience to return to your own diocese with the least possible delay.

Alphonsus had just finished reading lauds. Now the words of the psalmist came back to him: "A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; a contrite and humble heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

The next day he and Vitus Curtius returned to Naples.

IX

ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 10, 1733, Alphonsus knocked on the door of the Chinese College. When the door opened the light from the porter's lantern fell on the frayed, dusty hem of a cassock, from under which protruded a pair of shoes so worn out that they were tied together with thongs. The porter raised his lantern.

"Oh, Father Liguori, it's you. Come in."

"May I speak with Father Ripa?"

"Of course."

The porter ushered Alphonsus into the parlor and disappeared. After a long time he returned.

"Father Ripa regrets that he can't see you."

"I'll come back at his convenience," Alphonsus replied, wearily getting up.

The porter made a wry face. "Very well."

"Tomorrow perhaps?"

"I'm sorry, Father. Tomorrow won't be convenient either." They were walking toward the door.

"The next day?" Alphonsus asked.

"No, Father." The porter's voice was almost inaudible. "It won't be convenient for Father Ripa to see you at any time."

"Oh."

Alphonsus stepped across the threshold and the door was quickly closed behind him. He stood in the darkness wondering what to do. Vitus Curtius had already gone to the home of a friend, but it was too late for Alphonsus to knock on other doors, and the walk to Marianella seemed beyond his strength. There was, however, a stone bench at the gate of the Chinese College. For a while he

sat on it, wondering why he was unwelcome. It was true that Father Ripa had unreasonably considered his departure as a desertion of duty. It was also true that Alphonsus had left the Chinese College secretly, without saying good-by. Even in his weariness he smiled unhappily, realizing how an innocent action could be misinterpreted. He would, he decided, eventually have to get things straightened out with his old friend. Through the darkness the street noises of Naples came to him — the rattle of cart wheels, the shouting of merrymakers, the barking of dogs. They seemed far distant and unreal. He slept for a while. When he wakened he went into the street and started walking in the direction of Marianella. It was a long steep climb and a painful one, for his feet were covered with stone bruises where his shoe soles had worn through.

Although he found the house dark, a servant let him in. A moment later his mother came, wrapped in a dressing gown. He took her in his arms. Neither of them could speak, and at the moment words seemed of no importance. She fed him and sent him to the room where he had lived as a boy. There he slept long and hard, and there the next morning, while he still lay in bed, his father found him.

"So you've come home." Don Joseph's voice had in it something of joy and something of derision. Then he added bitterly, "For my sake and yours I'm glad this madness has passed . . . but all Naples is talking."

Alphonsus scarcely heard his father. What struck him most forcibly was that in the five months of his absence the old man had aged perceptibly.

"We've heard how everyone abandoned you. Don Salvatore says . . ."

Of course, Alphonsus suddenly realized, Tosquez had been to see Father Ripa. No doubt he had also spoken to Canon Torni and the cardinal.

"You're not listening," he heard Don Joseph say accusingly.

"It doesn't matter to me, Father, what Tosquez is saying." He closed his eyes, wishing desperately that he could say something

to comfort his father, but the old antagonism swept over him again. A moment later he had fallen asleep.

Alphonsus spent the next few weeks calling on his old friends.

He refused Canon Torni's invitation to rejoin the Neapolitan Propaganda. "I'm going to return to Scala," he said stubbornly, "provided I can get the cardinal's permission."

"You won't be able to get recruits now," the canon answered. "No one wants to join an institute that's already failed."

"There isn't any institute yet, so it didn't fail," Alphonsus said.

Torni paid no attention. "Besides, Tosquez tells everyone that you're impossible to work with — bullheaded, unsympathetic, certain that your own ideas are God's will and that everyone else's ideas are the devil's."

"I can't complain," Alphonsus said. "He's telling the truth."

Torni laughed. "I've worked with you. I know."

"If I can't get recruits," Alphonsus said, "I'll go into the mountains alone and live the rest of my life among the shepherds there."

He rode a donkey to Castellamare, where Bishop Falcoia greeted him with accusations. "So you too have given up! Never mind. God has no need of you, nor of anyone else."

"I haven't given up, Your Excellency," Alphonsus explained. "The cardinal ordered my immediate return to Naples. I'm going back to Scala as soon as I can."

"Forgive me," said Falcoia. "Then we can talk together."

From Falcoia he learned that Salvatore Toquez had circulated stories so damaging that many Neapolitans actually believed Alphonsus was insane. He also learned that at Scala the convent was in an uproar. Bishop Falcoia had been forced to send a letter to Sister Celeste, binding her to obey him under pain of expulsion.

"It was a stern measure to take," the bishop admitted. "But it's better to lose one nun than let the whole community go to pieces."

Alphonsus remained that night in Castellamare. He prayed as he had never prayed before, for the words and thoughts were

torn from a soul so sick and so discouraged that he could whisper only, "Christ have mercy on me, deliver me from despair." He wandered down to the sea, where the fishing boats lay idle, and listened to the water as it washed against their battered hulls. There seemed to be no logic to justify his return to Scala. Three of the companions who had left him were already ordained priests. That very fact had constituted the difficulty. They had been too set in their ways to be formed into a new community. This time he must look for younger men. But where would he find them? If he did get them, how could they become priests? The law required that no priest be ordained without a certain means of livelihood: his personal patrimony, the wealth of the diocese in which he had been accepted, or that of the congregation which he had joined. Once the institute was organized, its general income would provide this security. At present, however, there was no institute. Could he expect young men with vocations to come when their likelihood of ordination would be so small? Would those with independent wealth be sufficiently attracted? He doubted it, remembering his companions at the University of Naples.

The waterfront was deserted. Across the bay the smoke from Vesuvius lay in a white cloud against the blackness of the sky. Alphonsus climbed into a fishing boat and sat down, leaning against the mast. He began to think of the night when Christ had commanded the waves to be still. Of course it was useless to map out the future. He who had quieted the waves could solve all problems if He wished. It was enough that Alphonsus had been given a work to do and had taken a vow never to abandon it. The consequences of his labors were in the hands of God. He must work blindly, never listening to the prudence of the world, even if his path seemed to lie in the way of destruction.

The boat rocked back and forth, easily and pleasantly, and the water slapped against its side.

Mother Mary Angela, superior of the convent at Scala, sat at her desk. Through the open window behind her, she could

hear bees buzzing among the flowers. On the desk in front of her lay the letter Bishop Falcoia had addressed to Sister Celeste. Mother Mary Angela had entered the Visitation Convent when it was founded in 1720. At that time she had been nearly thirty. She was superior when the new rule was adopted and the nuns became known as the Redemptoristines. With the years her features had softened, the hair roots just visible at the edge of her coif had turned gray, and the lines about her mouth suggested that she was more compassionate than resolute. She had, however, buttressed herself with prayer. She glanced at the crucifix over the door and waited.

Thus Sister Celeste found her—quite placid and immobile.

"I hope, Sister," Mother Mary Angela said, "that you've followed my recommendation and have spent the last twenty-four hours in prayer."

"Yes, Mother, I have." Sister Celeste betrayed her nervousness by fingering her scapular.

"You are already acquainted with the demands which Bishop Falcoia has made. Nevertheless, we shall take them up one by one."

"Yes, Mother."

"Won't you sit down?"

Sister Celeste sat down on the edge of the chair, as if poised for flight.

"First, the bishop demands that you accept the rule for the institute of men as it stands, with whatever additions he and Father Liguori may agree upon. Are you willing to do this?"

"The rule was given to me, Mother, not to them. Have I no responsibility to preserve it?"

Mother Mary Angela studied Sister Celeste's face for a moment. She knew it even better than her own. Every expression that crossed it was as familiar to her as the repetition of an old, familiar rhyme. "Sister Celeste, when the Viceroy of Naples sends a message to the Duke of Tuscany, is it the messenger's obligation to see that the Duke interprets it correctly?"

"No, Mother."

"The messenger, Sister, is only an instrument. In this case you were the messenger. You were told to give the rule to Father Liguori. You fulfilled that obligation. Were you asked to do more than that?"

Sister Celeste faltered. "I guess not."

"It's wise to serve the Lord when he asks us, but service may be either a doing or a not doing. In either case, the obligation has nothing to do with what we desire. It may be difficult for you to see amplifications which you don't approve, or an institute organized contrary to the picture you carry in your imagination, but you have no choice. Think of it this way, Sister — A mother who bears a son is the means of giving life. But a time comes when the son is of age and acts according to his own free will. Then the mother must let him go his own way."

"I'm willing, Mother, to let the rule be changed."

"Amplified," Mother Mary Angela corrected.

"Very well, amplified."

Mother Mary Angela took up the bishop's letter. "The second command is that you give up all contact with Don Salvatore Tosquez."

Sister Celeste's eyes fell. "I let him influence me, Mother, only because I believed it would be for my spiritual good."

"I don't question that. Neither does Bishop Falcoia. But by making this sacrifice you will gain even more merit."

Sister Celeste looked up and said emphatically, "I shall never see him again, Mother. I shall never write to him again. In making that promise, I'm offering up the truest, the kindest friend I ever had."

"If it's to be a sacrifice pleasing to God, Sister, you must not even think of him in that way. In fact, you must not think of him at all. You must empty your mind of everything that has filled it during the last year. Forget that a rule was dictated to you, forget whatever Don Salvatore has told you, and remember only that you are an unworthy servant of God."

"I'll do the best I can, Mother."

"God will reward you, Sister, with greater consolations than you have ever known." Now Mother Mary Angela looked at the letter for the third time. "Finally the bishop demands that you place yourself under complete obedience to him and that you have no other spiritual director."

Sister Celeste's eyes filled with tears. "Mother, he has no right to demand that of me. It's slavery."

"No, Sister. It's evidence that he's deeply concerned about the state of your soul."

"He knows nothing about my soul, Mother. For years he was my spiritual director and he never so much as scratched the surface of my inner life."

"You would have no way of knowing that."

"He treated me like a child who's just entered the convent and doesn't know how to say her prayers."

"Perhaps he was justified."

"If he had been, I wouldn't resent it so."

"Then perhaps he wanted to insure your humility."

"It brought not humility but humiliation."

"And if it continues to bring humiliation," Mother Mary Angela said, "this last command alone will guarantee your sanctification. For that's the way saints are made."

"Mother, I'll do everything else," Sister Celeste pleaded. "I'll bury myself so deep in the nothingness of the convent that I'll be forgotten even by God. But I can't put myself under Bishop Falcoia's direction again!"

"He's a holy man, Sister Celeste, and a wise one."

"He's depriving me of a right that belongs to me — the right to choose my own spiritual director."

Mother Mary Angela gave a quick, frightened glance at the crucifix before she said softly, "Perhaps you have lost that right because you abused it."

"Abused it!" Sister Celeste cried. "How?"

"A spiritual director, my dear, must be a priest. Have you not carried to Don Salvatore problems that should be revealed only

to . . . " She stopped, startled by the sob that escaped from Sister Celeste, who had covered her face with her hands.

At the sight Mother Mary Angela felt her body wracked by that instinct of her sex which eternally yearns toward spiritual motherhood. Only by gripping the sides of her desk could she keep from folding the stricken nun in her arms. In that position she remained, waiting for the sobs to subside.

When Sister Celeste looked up again, it was to say, "I've already promised never to see Don Salvatore again. I'll put myself in the hands of any spiritual director you recommend except Bishop Falcoia. He can't command me to do what is unjust. And you have no right to ask it of me."

The words filled Mother Mary Angela with shame. "It's not I, but Bishop Falcoia who asks it," she said, hating herself for thus evading responsibility.

"He's not asking, Mother. He's demanding. How can you let him?"

"I'm sorry, Sister, but what can I do? We are all nailed together, each of us another Christ in his passion, and each of us at the same time the cross for other Christs like us. It's God's way. Through it we come to Him."

She waited. But Sister Celeste sat in silence, still fumbling with her scapular, her eyes averted.

"Remember, Sister, all things can be done with God's help. Pray for that."

"I can't pray for it," Sister Celeste said dully. "I can't pray for injustice."

The pity in Mother Mary Angela's face clouded to darkness. "The commands are to be obeyed under pain of expulsion from the convent," she said, and the words dropped one by one like pebbles falling on the floor.

Sister Celeste did not look at her. "Do anything with me that you wish. Death would be better than going back to Bishop Falcoia."

Mother Mary Angela's lips twitched. She looked down at her

desk and felt suddenly cold. "Do you realize what you are forcing me to do?" she asked in a low voice.

For the first time Sister Celeste flared up in anger and defiance. "Do you realize what you are forcing me to do?" Then her voice broke. "God forgive me. It's not you, Mother, I know. If I'm expelled from the convent, Bishop Falcoia alone will have to stand before God for it. I shall pray for him."

In the awful silence that followed, Mother Angela sat as stiff as a coffin board. "Very well, Sister," she said at last, "you may go now."

Three days later Sister Celeste had not changed her mind. Therefore, at the request of the superior, she packed her few belongings, removed her habit and veil, and put on a cotton dress. A boat was leaving for Naples shortly. She had been given enough money to pay for her passage, and a cousin had been asked to meet the boat on its arrival in Naples.

X

ALPHONSUS finally obtained the cardinal's permission to return to Scala. Vitus Curtius went with him. Although they took up residence once again in the guest house at the convent, Alphonsus passed much of his time in the cave among the cliffs where he had spent Good Friday morning. There everything seemed symbolic of his spiritual desolation: the crickets chirping in the dry grasses, the lizards lying shut-eyed and motionless on the sun-beaten stone, the one wild fig which sprang, twisted and dwarfed, from a fissure in the rocks. Yet once upon a time, Alphonsus knew, the Lord had taken Ezechiel to a plain full of dry bones and asked, "Dost thou think these bones shall live?" Ezechiel had answered, "O Lord God, thou knowest." Then the Lord had sent spirit into the bones, so that they came together, sinew and flesh grew upon them and they were covered with skin. Not only did they live, but standing on their feet, they became a great army.

So now Alphonsus waited to see what the Lord would do. Gradually, as the weeks and months dragged on, the dry bones came together and spirit was breathed into them. By autumn four men had joined Alphonsus and the community was again its original size. Each of the new recruits seemed, like Matthias, to have been especially chosen to take the place of one who had left. The first was Don Cesare Sportelli, who like Tosquez was a prominent Neapolitan lawyer. Unlike Tosquez, however, he came with generous-hearted enthusiasm. His mother had become a nun and both of them had long been friends of Bishop Falcoia. A few months later two priests arrived: Father Januarius Sarnelli, who had known Alphonsus at the Chinese College and had been ordained the preceding year, and Father Xavier Rossi. With them there was no question about the rule. They accepted the *Modus vivendi*,

they were eager for Bishop Falcoia's guidance, and in everything else they put themselves under obedience to Alphonsus.

Since Father Rossi came from a wealthy Capuan family, he was able to ease the financial burdens of the institute. In 1733 the community moved off the convent property into larger quarters in Scala. The following year, at the request of the bishop of Cajazzo, they acquired an old hermitage at Villa degli Schiavi, twenty-five miles north of Naples. There, without abandoning the foundation at Scala, they opened a novitiate. Requests for missions came, new vocations arrived, and the tide of public opinion changed. By 1734 Alphonsus was again the subject of admiration in the drawing rooms of Naples.

Of that, however, he knew little and cared less. Most of the time he was riding muleback up and down the narrow, winding goat paths of the Southern Apennines, visiting remote villages. Sometimes the men would set out before daybreak in pouring rain, sloshing along mountain trails that during the night had been transformed into gullies of deep, slippery mud. Sometimes they slept in those abandoned huts which shepherds use when they take their flocks into the mountain valleys for pasture. Nothing deterred them. They became accustomed to the howling of wolves, the dangers of floods and the recurrent malarial fevers which they came to accept as unavoidable. Wherever they went, they found the peasants as neglected as those around Scala.

In June they rode through the broad, fertile valley of the Volturno, crossed a wooden bridge over the Calore River, and entered Telese, a village of sulphur springs and poverty. There they dined with the pastor of San Salvatore on bean soup, bread, and goats' milk served in cups of baked clay. The pastor was suffering from tuberculosis and no longer able to get to Caserta for news. Peasants returning from market occasionally dropped in to chat with him. Usually they could tell him nothing except the prices of produce and the trivia of the countryside gossip. Usually too they had some request to make. Would he pray our Lady to cure a sick donkey? Would he bless the grapevines to pre-

vent mildew and ask St. Joseph to remove the wart from the nose of an unmarried daughter?

The priest was consequently delighted to have the missionaries as his guests, and he talked to them with the hasty eagerness of men who live too much alone. As a boy he had grown up in the neighborhood, he said, and for four years the parish had been with no priest. The magistrates had finally nailed up the door. On Sundays, of course, a few old women and children would walk to a neighboring town for Mass, but after a while the old women died and the children forgot. He supposed he would never have become a priest himself had he not gone to Caserta at the age of twelve to look for work. There the priests had hired him to scrub floors; and when God's grace had come upon him, they sent him to school. Later he discovered that even his fellow seminarians were little interested in serving the country parishes. They all hoped for comfortable places in the city. It was the spirit of the times. You couldn't blame the bishops for that. As for himself, he did not doubt that he had been ordained for the precise purpose of returning to his childhood parish.

"That's enough about myself," he said, suddenly embarrassed. "I expected to learn from you something about the new king."

The new king? Alphonsus and his companions did not know what he was talking about.

For once the pastor had the pleasure of purveying news himself. Where had they been not to know that Don Carlos, the Duke of Parma, had marched on Naples with a Spanish army?

They had been for three months in the mountains northeast of Telesse, where spring floods had washed away the bridges and wiped out whole villages. Much of the livestock had been buried under landslides or swept away by mountain streams swollen into torrents. If the peasants had anything left to sell, they couldn't have gotten to market anyway.

Don Carlos had put on a wonderful show, the priest said. All the Neapolitans had come into the streets to welcome him, and he had tossed gold and silver coins at them as freely as if they

were confetti. Such a boy, and not yet twenty years old!

"Where is the viceroy?" Alphonsus asked.

He had fled to Vienna. What else could he do? The Spanish fleet lay within view of the city, her decks covered with soldiers and banners. Besides, the Neapolitan nobles had met Don Carlos outside the city to offer him their loyalty. Everyone said he was a wise young man; but, as if recognizing his youth, he had brought with him a lawyer from Tuscany — Bernard Tanucci — who had great plans for reforming the kingdom. Perhaps Naples would become as enlightened a country as France.

"And as irreligious?" Alphonsus asked.

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? Is it better to be destitute and ignorant, or to be prosperous and . . ." He hunted for the precise word.

"Corrupt," Alphonsus suggested.

The priest threw out his hands in protest. "No, no, that is too harsh. Shall we not rather say 'misguided'?"

"Italy has already had its Machiavelli," Alphonsus answered. "Must she also have a Descartes and a Montesquieu?"

To the pastor, who had been forced by poverty to dispose of all his books, the names sounded like familiar bells ringing in the distance, but he could not remember whether they indicated a wedding or a death.

"The king is a fine Catholic," he said after a pause. "As soon as he entered Naples he went to the cathedral to pray and to ask for the cardinal's blessing, and he put a necklace of rubies and diamonds on the statue of St. Januarius."

Alphonsus was unimpressed. He had studied enough history to recognize the gestures as conventional ones. "What is Tanucci?" he asked.

"Who knows? He's a lawyer and an opportunist."

An ancient woman with a hideous wen on one cheek removed the supper plates and brought in a basket of dried figs; the summer harvest was not yet ripe. They were a sickly yellow and tasteless.

"Don't expect many at the mission," the priest warned. "Fifteen

or twenty come to Sunday Mass. Of course, on big feasts there are more — and always after an earthquake."

The mission would not open for two days.

"Can you draw me a map of your parish?" Alphonsus asked.

Since the priest had been born and raised not five miles away, he knew all the paths, as well as every hut, tree, and stone along them. "What do you want with a map?"

"There's time to visit your parishioners before the preaching begins. If they don't come to Mass, how else will they know about the mission? But I'll need a map to find my way."

"The women and children may come, but the men won't. They're working the vineyards now."

"Then they'll understand that I'm working my vineyard too," Alphonsus said and laughed.

The mission was a success. The pastor estimated that about two hundred had come each night. "I didn't know I had that many in the parish," he said vaguely. He had hemorrhaged the night before and was thinking about death.

When Alphonsus returned to Villa degli Schiavi a new recruit was awaiting him — Father John Mazzini, who had been his companion as a street preacher in Naples and who had waited three years for permission from his confessor.

After they embraced, Mazzini said, "I come with no good news from Naples."

"We have a king now, I hear."

"Kings are not important," Mazzini replied. "Ministers are."

"Tanucci?"

"Yes."

"What sort of man is he?"

"Already powerful. He believes the kingdom is priest-ridden and is eager to begin weeding his garden."

Alphonsus went into his room to look over two months' accumulation of mail. Mazzini's comments about Tanucci were disquieting. As yet their little community had no official status with

either Church or government. Alphonsus had, in fact, wanted to wait until they were more firmly established. Nevertheless, he knew, a royal command could disband them, and an anticlerical government would most likely strike first at new and insecure communities. One by one he opened the letters on his desk.

Sportelli had written from Scala. The spring had been uncommonly late and most of the men were suffering from diarrhea. Funds were low. Villagers came to the house frequently to ask for Masses, but their stipends were so negligible that he had found it necessary to reduce the daily rations of food. Everyone was happy, of course, and thankful that God favored them with small difficulties. Nonetheless, he had prayed the Blessed Virgin for a nanny goat and six hens. They could be kept in the enclosure behind the house. It was true, they had a garden, but as soon as the first vegetables were ready, thieves had scaled the monastery wall at night and left not so much as a leek behind. God bless them! Knowing the destitution of the people, he had decided not to make any report to the magistrate.

The implications of the letter were clear enough to Alphonsus. With sufficient food the men would be less likely to fall ill. The funds which Father Rossi had brought to the institute had been allocated to the foundation at Villa degli Schiavi, on the supposition that Scala could be supported by the people of the community. But the people either would not or could not give sufficient help. Alphonsus wondered if it was wise to continue the foundation there.

He noticed a letter from Bishop Falcoia and under it . . . Alphonsus stared at a square envelope addressed with bold, black strokes. He could not mistake the handwriting. He turned it over. The blob of wax which sealed it bore the letters "C.B.S." After leaving Scala, Mannarini, Donato, and Tosquez had founded a community of their own, which they called the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. According to reports it had prospered remarkably. Alphonsus broke the seal, unfolded the letter and began reading.

With his characteristic bluntness Father Mannarini assured Alphonsus of his own success. The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament, he said, now had two houses fully equipped and endowed. Vocations had not been lacking. Furthermore, Don Salvatore Tosquez, who had recently returned from a visit to Rome, had so impressed the Holy Father with his sanctity and brilliance that he had been offered a position at the papal court. This, of course, he had declined.

The foregoing information, Father Mannarini explained, was prefatory to a request. The Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament wished to join Father Liguori's congregation. Its members were willing to turn over all property, appurtenances, funds, etc. Thus Father Liguori's community would become almost double its present size, would have four houses instead of two, and would be relieved of financial insecurity. The merger, Father Mannarini thought, would also assure speedy approbation of the institute at Rome. "We have been divided in the eyes of the world," he continued, "but not in the eyes of God. Neither I nor my companions have ever ceased to recommend you to our Lord. Let us then draw a veil over the past and fix our thoughts on the present, and so do God's work together."

Alphonsus folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. It was the most certain evidence he had received of the reputation which his own community had earned during the last three years. He wondered if the security which Father Mannarini offered was a temptation to be resisted or a test of his own charity. He still could not recall the turbulence of those first months at Scala without something resembling physical pain. He would not suffer them again for all the castles in the Kingdom of Naples—but for the glory of God, he would suffer them a hundred times. He knew, however, that his decision must not be conditioned by personal feelings. All that mattered was God's will; and that could be determined only by prayer, the advice of Bishop Falcoia, and common sense. Had Mannarini brought his petition in person, Alphonsus would have fallen upon his neck and wept; for with

him it was a hard thing to endure the ill will of a friend, and he had already had much of it in his life.

The next letter concerned some property which had been offered to the community at Ciorani in the Diocese of Salerno.

One by one Alphonsus read all the letters until only one remained — that from his father. At last he opened it.

Don Joseph was filled with enthusiasm for the new king and for Bernard Tanucci, who were certain to bring peace and prosperity to everyone. A great crowd had gathered at the waterfront to watch the Austrian colors being lowered from the galleys and to cheer when the flag of the Kingdom of Naples was hoisted in their place. Were Alphonsus still practicing law he would have the world at his feet. And, Don Joseph added, he did not mean this in a purely selfish sense. There was work to be done for the government as well as for the mountaineers. On this point, the cardinal agreed with him. At Don Joseph's suggestion the matter had already been called to the attention of King Charles, who had the right of making nominations to episcopal sees throughout the kingdom. Every assurance had been given that Alphonsus' name would be brought up at the first vacancy.

Alphonsus read no further. He did not even notice his father's comment regarding Anna Caterina's health. In his usual, short-sighted, blundering way Don Joseph was pushing his son into disaster. If the king nominated him for a bishopric and he declined, he would incur the royal disfavor. Then every chance for his institute would be destroyed. Alphonsus wrote his reply at once:

My dear father,

Do not mention the episcopate to me again unless you wish to give me real pain. In case it were offered to me, even if it were the archbishopric of Naples, I would refuse, in order to continue this great work to which Jesus Christ has called me. If I abandoned this work, I would regard myself as among the damned. . . .

Early the next morning he sent Januarius Rendina, one of the lay brothers, to Marianella with his message, praying that it would arrive in time.

XI

THE NEW FOUNDATION AT CIORANI was a gift of the Sarnelli family. At the time of its acquisition came Bishop Falcoia's advice regarding the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament: "God forbid! Let it not be so much as mentioned." An unhappy reunion was not necessary for survival.

Now too Don Joseph gave up all attempts to obtain a bishopric for his son. Perhaps he was impressed by the approval of a family so influential as the Sarnellis. Perhaps also he was convinced of Alphonsus' success by news that the building being raised on the new property would be large enough to accommodate not only the community but some one hundred retreatants. Had he seen the work of construction, however, he would have been horrified, for among the laborers carting stone and hewing timbers were some who wore tonsures. One of them was Alphonsus. When he was not giving missions, he joined the workmen. Although he was still the small, asthmatic, delicate-faced man whom Neapolitans remembered, he had long been accustomed to strenuous physical activity. Hoisting unhewn timber for ceiling beams was no harder than freeing a donkey mired belly-deep in mud. His muscles had hardened, and his face, beaten by wind and sun, looked more like the face of a fisherman than that of a scholar who had already published the first of his ascetical works.

For Alphonsus, much to his own surprise, had begun writing. Once on a dull afternoon he had reached for a volume on his bookshelf and paused, remembering the rectory at Telese which could not boast of so much as a copy of the *Imitation of Christ*. At that moment the idea had occurred to him of writing a number of short pamphlets which at little cost could be distributed

among country parishes. The first of these, entitled *Maxims of Eternity*, had been so well received that Alphonsus was now at work on a second, *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*.

The house at Ciorani was scarcely opened when that at Villa degli Schiavi was plunged into trouble. Five novices, discontent with religious life, left at the same time. Their defection almost totally destroyed the novitiate. This alone would have been sufficient cause for gossip; but shortly afterward a village prostitute was converted. Some of the men, having thus been deprived of their pleasure, could not or would not believe that women of ill repute came to the priests' house for spiritual help alone. They threatened to violate the cloisters in order to prove their preposterous accusations; and their wives were quick to accept whatever stories came on the wind. The situation became so ominous that Alphonsus finally advised the community to leave. The priests abandoned the house secretly by night, delivered the keys to the bishop at Cajazzo and made their way on foot to Ciorani.

Soon afterward Scala was also closed. It had served its purpose and neither climate nor location was satisfactory.

In 1738 Vesuvius erupted. A strong wind, black with its burden of ashes, swept northwestward over Palma, Nola, Avellino, and Ciorani, so that vast tracts of fertile land suddenly became desert. Familiar roads disappeared. There remained no top soil into which a farmer could sink his wooden plow, no pasture where a shepherd might drive his flock. Terrified peasants besieged their parish priests for help and the priests begged Alphonsus for missions. At the same time, in cities once white-walled and choked with flowers, men issued from ash-blackened buildings and thought for the first time of final judgment. Hastily they came to Ciorani to make their peace with God. The priests, crowded out of their own cubicles, slept on wooden planks laid over the concrete refectory floor. Among the retreatants were some who had known Alphonsus in Naples and had loudly deprecated his work. One of these by chance discovered under the staircase at Ciorani a

small, windowless room where Alphonsus took his disciplines. News of the discovery spread. Retreatants arranged to pass by the staircase at a certain hour to hear the sound of the whip, and some, ashamed of former calumnies and fornications, became humbled because a man whom they had once despised was doing penance for their sins.

As a result of the retreats, vocations increased. As a result of the missions, more than one bishop begged Alphonsus to open a house in his diocese. Unfortunately the requests had to be turned down. There were still only ten members in the community, counting Alphonsus: five priests, four lay brothers, and the lawyer, Don Cesare Sportelli, who would be ordained the following year. In 1742, however, a new foundation was made at Pagani, situated at the foot of Monte Albino and only eight miles from Vesuvius. Although again property and building were the gift of friends, the new project met with opposition. Popular enthusiasm so antagonized the local clergy that three years were to pass before Alphonsus was assured of the permanence of his new house.

Meanwhile, he remained at Ciorani, where the novitiate had been established after the closing of Villa degli Schiavi. From there he directed the affairs of the community and continued his writing. In 1743 he called a general meeting at which priests and brothers for the first time took the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and repeated a vow of perseverance which they had taken in 1740. Now also Alphonsus set to work once more on a rule for the institute. Bishop Falcoia had recently died without completing the constitutions and had even failed to return the draft of a rule which Alphonsus had sent him in 1733. After ten years the community was still following the original *Modus vivendi*. Since an early attempt to obtain royal approbation for his institute had ended in failure, Alphonsus was determined to make no further effort for either papal or royal approval until the rule and constitutions were complete.

Falcoia's death had also left Alphonsus without the spiritual director whom he had faithfully obeyed for ten years. There

was, however, in the community at Ciorani a priest by the name of Andrew Villani—a fair-haired young man with a receding chin and a short upper lip. Alphonsus had watched him and liked him. He was quick to show humor, slow to make decisions, and he had a dogged persistence which might be either obstinacy or fortitude.

One day Alphonsus sent for him. "As you know," he said, "I'm not a saint."

"Had I the grace to discern saints," Villani replied with a twinkle in his eye, "I would surely be one."

"Which you are not," Alphonsus said emphatically, "even though in the future I may sometimes act as if you were. I'm looking for a spiritual director."

The twinkle in Villani's eyes disappeared. "May the Lord have mercy on me!" he said in confusion. "I recommend the Cardinal Archbishop of Naples."

"I didn't ask for your recommendation," Alphonsus answered. "I want you to be my spiritual director."

Villani began pacing the floor rapidly, like a cornered animal seeking escape. Then he made a brisk semicircle and faced Alphonsus. "Very well, I accept. My first advice as your spiritual director is: Go to someone else."

"Nonsense!" Alphonsus said. "Sit down and listen to me."

Villani obeyed.

"Don't think I have any illusions about your character." Alphonsus loved his priests too well to tempt them to pride. "What a man needs in his spiritual director is not sanctity but common sense. He also needs those qualities which are lacking in himself. Against my capacity for suffering, I balance your capacity for laughter; against my impulsiveness, your exasperating hesitance, against . . ."

Villani interrupted. "Just because it is exasperating I'd fail in the task you've cut out for me."

"You won't fail," Alphonsus assured him. "I'm accustomed to being exasperated. You can at least draw the reins when the horse

becomes fractious. As for my temper . . ." He waited a moment, glad that Villani did not fill the silence with some insincere reassurance. Everyone knew he had a temper. "As for my temper — well, prevent eruptions when you can. Otherwise, carry water to put out the flames. I expect a long purgatory for those sins."

Villani shook his head. "When you ask me to take Falcoia's place, Father, you're asking too much."

"I'm not asking that. Falcoia's death has been like the loss of an arm. I wouldn't expect another to grow in its place."

"Say whatever you please. I still can't do it."

Alphonsus felt the temper, which he had just admitted, rising. "You came here to serve God, whether the tasks assigned to you were pleasant or unpleasant," he said severely. "This is about the most unpleasant task you could get, but with the help of the Holy Ghost you can do it."

He left Villani in the midst of his misery, but at the door he turned to add, "By the way, I'm not putting myself under obedience to you."

"Thank God for that!" Villani said.

In 1744 a group of Neapolitan nobles came to Ciorani for retreat. Among them were the Prince of Presiccio, the Duke of Presenzano, and Don Joseph Liguori. They arrived in laced coats, cravats, and bright-colored, tightly fitting breeches. All wore powdered perukes except Don Joseph, who still dyed his hair black and tied it in a queue at his neck. Most of them were old men now; their cadaverous faces were maps offering an easy key to the passions and frustrations of the past. Alphonsus thought his father looked extremely frail.

"I'm quite all right," Don Joseph insisted. "I don't feel a day over sixty and my mind is as clear as ever. But the groom was insolent all the way. That Moor who cost me so much on the Leghorn market had the effrontery to die before I'd gotten my money's worth out of him. Those black fellows can't stand the

climate. Where are the statues I sent? I suppose you've tucked them away in some rat hole."

Don Joseph had presented the new foundation with four statuettes depicting the Lord in different stages of His Passion. They were well done, for the old man still had taste.

"They're on the altar in chapel," Alphonsus said. "Everyone admires them."

"I'll take a look at them now," Don Joseph decided. "The man who cast them was a robber!"

So while the lay brothers were looking after the guests and their servants, Alphonsus took his father to the chapel.

Don Joseph was delighted. "Just where they belong!" he said, admiring his gift. "Does everyone know I sent them?"

Afterward he examined the building from garret to wine cellar, tottering as he grew increasingly weary, but refusing to give up.

"Unhewn ceiling beams!" he exclaimed in disgust when he saw the refectory. "And the floor! *Dio mio*, what is it?"

"Mud and concrete," Alphonsus said. "After all, we've chosen to live in poverty."

Don Joseph snorted. "Poverty! What does the word mean? Ten years ago you were complaining about poverty in the city slums. If that's poverty, this isn't."

Alphonsus took his father to see the cubacula in the cloisters.

"Coffins!" Don Joseph cried. "How big are they?"

"Eight by ten, Father."

"And you gave up Marianella to sleep in a coffin!" The old man sighed. "I could have gotten you the bishopric of Salerno. Did you know that? That's not to be sneezed at. The bishopric of Salerno. Instead you live like this! And the men whose grandchildren you should have sired come to hear you preach." Suddenly he turned to his son and embraced him.

"God bless you, Father," Alphonsus said, deeply touched.

Don Joseph wiped away his tears with the ruffle of his undersleeve. "In Naples they're calling you a saint. Well, let the bishop-

rics go. The Liguoris have achieved everything but sanctity. Maybe we need a saint in the family."

"Hush, Father." Alphonsus was filled with both embarrassment and pity. The old man's ill-temper now seemed to him like the fussiness of old age.

Alphonsus asked about his mother.

"Anna Caterina?" His father was not interested. "Women have no troubles. They just wither away. Your mother, I'd say, withers somewhat slowly."

Retreat ended after Mass on the fourth day. By midmorning the grooms had saddled the horses and brought them to the entrance. The buckled and bewigged gentlemen were gathered in the visitor's parlor taking leave of their hosts. One of them had slipped into his valise the manuscript of *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament*, which Alphonsus had recently completed.

"It's excellent," he whispered to the Duke of Presenzano. "I'm going to have it printed."

"What will you do with it then?" the Duke asked.

The old man chuckled. "Wait and see. In six months I warrant the whole Diocese of Naples will be using it."

The Duke was unimpressed. Anxious to be on his way, he glanced around the room. "Well, where is Don Joseph?" he asked.

Then for the first time everyone noticed that Don Joseph Liguori was missing.

Presuming that his father had wanted to take a final look at the statues, Alphonsus went to the chapel. There he found only a priest and two lay brothers. From chapel he went to the guest room his father had been occupying. The old man was sitting on the edge of the bed, coatless, in his stocking feet.

"Father, what are you doing?" Alphonsus asked. "The horses are saddled and everyone is ready to leave."

"Tell them to go on," Don Joseph said.

Alphonsus reached for his father's riding boots. "Come now, put these on. It's a long ride and you musn't go back alone, not even with the groom."

Don Joseph looked stubbornly at the riding boots. "I won't need them any more. Throw them away."

"You certainly will need them." Alphonsus was mystified. "You can't ride without them."

"But I'm not going."

"You're not going?"

"No, I'm staying. I thought the whole matter through last night. I've decided to become a lay brother."

"A lay brother!" Alphonsus tried to imagine the hot-tempered ship's captain scrubbing the refectory floor. "That's impossible!"

"It's not impossible at all," Don Joseph said crossly. "My galley has a new captain. There's no need for me in Naples. I may not show it, Alphonsus, but I'm getting old — older than you'd ever guess. I'd like to spend my last days right here. Besides . . ." He leaned forward as if to reveal a secret. "I have some sins to do penance for."

"This is no place for you," Alphonsus said gently.

The old man began to cry. "Please let me stay!" he begged.

Alphonsus put his arm around his father's shoulder. "I know how you feel, but have you forgotten Mother?"

"Oh, Anna Caterina. Alphonsus, you know nothing about women, and that's a pity. They get along very well without us. Anna Caterina wouldn't even notice."

"She certainly would notice, Father. She needs you."

"But I need to do penance for my sins."

"We all have sins, Father, but we don't all need to do penance in the same way."

"I'm staying just the same."

"But you'd gain no merit by doing penance here, Father, when God wants you at home, looking after Mother. Besides you have property and other obligations. The best penance you can do is to stay at Marianella and by your charity bring peace and happiness to everyone in the household there."

Alphonsus got down on his knees and began drawing on the old man's boots. Don Joseph did not protest. When they were adjusted,

he stood up and slipped his arms into the waistcoat which Alphonsus held for him. Then he put on his coat.

"Your hat, Father."

Don Joseph reached for his hat and put it on backward. Alphonsus changed it for him. Then they went together to the parlor, where the rest of the party were still impatiently waiting.

XII

ALPHONSUS, two other priests, and a lay brother were crossing the Apulian plain in the direction of Foggia one day in 1745. The two donkeys, which they rode in relays, were equipped with panniers and some goatskins of water. It was late afternoon in January. The level grassland stretched monotonously in all directions, affording no variation except where frequent outcroppings of limestone gave it a depressingly threadbare appearance. Occasionally the men passed a poverty-stricken hovel or saw in the distance the smoke of a brush fire. For the most part the mule path they were following was deserted. Peasants in the neighborhood of Foggia usually traveled southwest along the main route to Beneventum or southeast to the Adriatic. The missionaries were going northward toward the apex of the triangle formed by these two carriage roads.

After leaving Ilceto early that morning, they had passed through woodlands and fertile farming country; but the woodlands had dwindled, the cultivated fields had disappeared, and water had become so scarce that by now the last goatskin was almost empty.

It was their habit when traveling to maintain monastic discipline as much as possible. Consequently they trudged along the path in silence, their ragged cloaks wrapped around their bodies as a protection against the winter wind which grew more chill as the sun declined. They hoped to reach Foggia before dark.

Alphonsus was reviewing in his mind the past years. They had been filled with activity. He had managed to write half a dozen spiritual pamphlets addressed to the clergy and one dissertation which he hoped would help to extirpate an abuse common among the ignorant, that of cursing the dead. Then too he had finally completed the rule and constitutions of the order. It was well,

since King Charles had recently passed a decree that no one could found a church, monastery or congregation without royal consent. Within the next few months, Alphonsus decided, he would draw up a petition for approbation and take it himself to Naples. He dared not delay longer, for the community was growing.

The novitiate had just been moved into an old convent at Ilceto, seventy-five miles northeast of Naples. The new foundation had come through the charity of Andrew Calvini, governor of the place, and his friend Canon Casati of the collegiate church, who had given all his property to the community. Seen from the exterior the building had the appearance of prosperity. Inside, however, the little group of students and priests lived in almost painful poverty. The building was so drafty that successive epidemics of colds had lowered the vitality of even the hardiest among them. The diet was necessarily lean, and just now, when habits were wearing out at the elbows and shoe soles growing dangerously thin, there was no money to replace them. Even so, Alphonsus did not regret the Ilceto foundation. It opened to the community a vast new mission territory, reaching on the north to the foot of Mount Gargano and on the east to the Adriatic Sea.

It seemed to Alphonsus that at last the old enmities had died. Now wherever he turned he found friends. He wondered what would have happened to his order without them. The new house at Pagani, situated on the main road between Naples and Salerno, had also been a gift. Two priests, Fathers Tipaldo and Contaldi, had offered their entire fortunes to the community. The latter, already retired, had requested only that he be provided with board and lodging in the new foundation. And now the Archbishop of Conza was urging a fourth foundation at the village of Caposele. It would be an excellent location, Alphonsus thought, for the village was about twenty-five miles south of Ilceto and an equal distance east of Ciorani . . .

The thought of Ciorani reminded Alphonsus of his father as he had seen him for the last time, riding away after retreat — a frail,

bewildered old man in a buckskin coat and a three-cornered hat. He had dutifully returned to Marianella and spent the next few months in singular quiet. News of his death the following year brought Alphonsus no unusual concern. His father had enjoyed a full span of life and had died at peace with God. Furthermore, Anna Caterina was not left alone, since the two youngest children, Hercules and Teresa, had married and were living in Naples. Other deaths had been more difficult to bear — that, for instance, which had taken Vitus Curtius, the only member of the community who had remained faithful from the first days at Scala; and that of Father Januarius Sarnelli, who had come during those black months when his first companions had deserted him.

The sun set. Gradually the landscape darkened to a desolate shade of brown, except far off where the horizon turned to purple. The first stars of evening appeared, and finally down the path ahead of them glimmered a handful of scattered lights. They had reached Foggia.

As soon as the men and their donkeys entered the village, doors were flung open and men, women, and children came rushing out. The streets were filled with a confusion of people and barking dogs. Housewives with scissors pulled at Alphonsus in an effort to obtain snippings from his clothing, until his companions had to shove them roughly away.

"Something must be going on," Alphonsus said, "a winter festival of some sort."

"You are the festival," the lay brother commented.

At that moment a woman shrieked, "*Il santo! Il santo!*"

The rest of the crowd took up the cry. The "miracle saint" had come back to Foggia, but the toothless old women who had once stood beside him on the steps of the cathedral were dead.

At the bishop's palace the dining table was covered with a white cloth, a kettle filled with soup hung over the kitchen fire and a leg of mutton sizzled on the spit.

During dinner, however, the travelers were so tired that one of them kept dozing over his tumbler of wine.

"As you can see, my companions need sleep," Alphonsus said. "And I have a call to make at the convent."

The bishop was surprised. "Surely, Father, you're not going out again tonight?"

"By now the nuns must know we're here, Your Excellency. If I wait until tomorrow, one of them may be disappointed."

The bishop wanted to comment that any nun could profit by an occasional disappointment. Instead he said, "One of them? You must have an old friend there."

"I have, Your Excellency. Mother Celeste Crostarosa."

The bishop laughed. "Of course, I had forgotten. The little nun who had visions."

Alphonsus nodded.

The Redemptoristine community in Foggia was so completely cloistered that the identity of its members tended to become lost. Mother Celeste was known only as Mother Superior. It was not surprising that the bishop had forgotten the rumors about her. Now, however, they came back to his mind. "Is it true," he asked, "that she was expelled?"

Alphonsus replied with another question. "Is it not true, Your Excellency, that God brings suffering to those He loves? What matters now is that she is back and, I hope, at peace. But I must get to the convent."

The bishop rose. "Very well. I'll have the stable boy show you the way."

The streets were empty now. Behind the swinging lantern of his guide, Alphonsus passed a succession of white walls, turned a corner and arrived at the convent, which had been established some years before by the nuns of Scala. It was a small, unpretentious building, flush with the street in front and flanked by a high-walled garden.

The extern, immediately recognizing the caller, knelt for his blessing.

"Sister Ignatius," Alphonsus said, for he knew all the nuns by name. "I want to see everyone tomorrow before the mission opens.

But I came tonight just to speak with Mother Superior."

"I'm sure she's waiting for you, Father."

She led Alphonsus into a cold, bare parlor, lighted a candelabrum from the taper which she carried and disappeared. Almost instantly the superior was standing behind the grille. In the dimness of the candlelight Alphonsus could not see that her practical face, with its firm mouth and inexpressive eyes, had acquired through the passing of years a tranquillity that could almost substitute for beauty, or that the hands, which she still carried crosswise on her breast, were thinner now and lined with big blue veins.

"Father Liguori!"

Alphonsus blessed her. "Mother, I've remembered you in every Mass."

"It's because you remembered me," she said, "that I am here."

Then they talked with great matter-of-factness about the Foggia foundation, new vocations, and the mother house at Scala.

"We're using your *Visits to the Blessed Sacrament* and the *Prayers to Our Lady*," she suddenly said. "Did the bishop tell you, Father, that he's sent them to every parish in the diocese?"

"No." Alphonsus did not seem interested.

"You must write more, Father—for our good, for everyone's good."

Accustomed to speaking through the grille, Alphonsus could read every movement of the indistinct figure, every modulation in the voice. Thus, by the gesture of a half-seen hand and a moment of pregnant silence, he knew the time had come to mention what was uppermost in both their minds.

"This is our first meeting, Mother Celeste, in many years," he said. "May I ask you a question?"

There was a barely perceptible tremor in her reply. "You may ask me anything."

"Have you ever doubted the truth of your revelations?"

"No, no, never! I'm as certain of them as of the air I breathe."

"Good!" Alphonsus said. "I've never doubted them either."

Although the voice became firm and matter-of-fact again, Al-

phonsus recognized by a clasping of hands and a straightening of shoulders how much effort was required. "I know what you're thinking, Father. It's true. I've been through spiritual death. Sometimes I think I've tasted hell. I should have expected it. In the first revelation I was told I would suffer the Lord's abandonment on the cross."

"And you have."

"Yes, I had to. How stupid I was!" She stopped. "No . . . I may as well be honest. How wicked I was! So wicked that only by the complete withdrawal of grace could I learn that in myself I am nothing."

"It was never a complete withdrawal," Alphonsus said. "It was like that which a mother sometimes allows so that her wayward child will hastily come home."

"Isn't it strange that God would care so much?" Mother Celeste's words seemed to rise on wings of lightheartedness. "There's no joy like that of coming home. The love is so deep now, Father, I can scarcely regret the pride which brought me to its fullness."

On the way back to the bishop's house Alphonsus was thinking to himself: Poor people of Foggia — so eager for manifested miracles, so unaware of hidden ones. How foolish to cry "*Il santo*" to one they scarcely knew and disregard the saint who lived among them. The swinging of the stable boy's lantern at that moment reminded him of the slow dancing movement of peasants treading grapes with their bare feet. Out of the destruction of the fruit the wine comes; then at a word, out of the wine comes immortal life. So it had been with Mother Celeste — first the destruction, then the word spoken and finally the miracle.

From the moment of its opening the mission at Foggia was accompanied by general turbulence. It was said that the Blessed Virgin had miraculously appeared again and that Alphonsus, kneeling before her picture, had cried out, "My Lady, is it your pleasure to play with me!" Those present at the time claimed that his face had been radiant and that he had risen into the air. Skeptics,

however, who had not attended church, asked how anyone could see Alphonsus' countenance if he knelt facing the picture on the wall.

On the second day of the mission merchants closed their shops for lack of business. Herdsmen left their sheep unattended in the field. Those who could not crowd into the cathedral stood outside in the cold. One half-blind girl, not perceiving that services had started, entered the confessional. Afterward she insisted that Alphonsus had heard her confession and given her absolution. "Ridiculous!" her friends protested, for Alphonsus at that moment was on the altar. Yet those who believed the first miracle found no difficulty in accepting the second. Didn't everyone know that many saints had the gift of bilocation? Besides, the village attorney had heard a similar tale from his nephew who was a student at the University of Naples. The nephew had gotten it from a Capuan, a follower of Giovanni Vico, who did not believe in miracles at all. Yet the Capuan had the story on such reliable authority that he was on the point of renouncing his materialistic philosophy. Alphonsus, he said, was delivering a lecture in Naples when a beggar called at the house in Pagani to collect an alms. Scarcely had the porter turned him away when Alphonsus appeared with the money. The incident had taken place at exactly two-thirty in the afternoon. At two o'clock on that same day Alphonsus had begun his lecture in Naples and had not concluded it until three.

Such gossip concerning miracles was interspersed with public demonstrations of repentance. Five persons suddenly died. Were these deaths coincidental, the villagers wondered, or had the hand of God struck as in the case of Ananias and Saphira? At any rate, a number of prostitutes became so frightened that they fled to a convent for penitents.

The only person who did not share in the general excitement was Alphonsus. As it increased, he grew increasingly depressed.

"Are they coming to church because they love God?" he sadly asked the bishop. "Or are they coming to see a show?"

When he entered the street his companions had to form a bodyguard to keep the crowds away. Once beset by enthusiastic

admirers, he turned and shouted almost savagely, "I'm no buffoon who has come to entertain you. There are sword swallowers in Naples, if you want that sort of thing."

The crowd fell back in shocked silence.

His voice became kinder then. "For the sake of God, listen to me only in order to forget me. When one serves the Lord and His Mother, there's no room for any other devotion."

To this, one woman courageously replied, "We want only to show our gratitude."

"Then pray God to forgive me for my sins," Alphonsus said. "You can do nothing better for me than that."

The next day during Mass he whispered fervently, "Deliver me, O Lord, from miracles as Thou wouldst deliver me from plague. Let me lie under the feet of sinners as a road leading nowhere but to Thee."

From Foggia Alphonsus returned to Ilceto, constrained by exhaustion to ride one of the donkeys all the way. At the first sight of him Father Villani realized he was seriously ill. His asthma had become acute and his face was flushed with fever.

"It's nothing," Alphonsus reassured him. "I need a little rest."

Yet he lay ill for a long time, and as the days passed into weeks his strength did not return. He would say Mass in the morning and return to his room, breathing heavily, too tired for physical activity. Consequently he prayed and meditated. Then one afternoon he sat down at his desk and began to write. What started as an intimate conversation with God developed into a little tract entitled *Meditations on the Passion*. When he reached the end of it, he felt such peace that the weakness of his body seemed inconsequential.

Two days later he began his *Moral Theology*. This was something different, addressed not to the laity but to the clergy, in the hope that he might bring them some of the practical conclusions which were the fruit of both his studies and experience. To his back-

ground of learning in civil and canon law, he had added over the years an understanding of human nature, derived first from the law courts and later from the confessional. He had long opposed both the rigorism of Jansenistic thought and the laxity of those who attacked it. The latter error, he wrote, "opens a broad way to perdition," whereas the former "drives souls to ruin . . . by an erroneous conscience and by despair." For that reason he sought to set down as precisely as possible some rules which would keep his fellow priests in the difficult way of moderation. Over the *Moral Theology*, he was destined to labor for fifteen years, and he was to live long enough to see the three volumes go into a ninth edition. Yet he never allowed his absorption in the work to interfere with his duties as a Redemptorist.

During these months he was also working on a petition to be presented to King Charles. Now with the rule completed, he was at last ready also to apply for papal approbation. Nevertheless, it seemed urgent that he apply first to the king. Matters of state, he knew, rested largely in the hands of Tanucci, whose anti-clericalism was a subject of popular discussion. It was said that he had advised the king to suppress certain monasteries and appropriate their properties, to limit the number of priests within the kingdom, and to reduce or abolish ecclesiastical tithes. In other words, he was bringing to the Kingdom of Naples the old quarrel between ecclesiastical and temporal power which had already caused tragedy to the Church. Papal approbation would profit little if Charles chose summarily to suppress his houses.

For this work which lay ahead of him, Alphonsus' legal knowledge was of great value. Hour after hour, he sat over his desk in an effort to present his case clearly and succinctly.

Meanwhile the rains ceased. Birds skimmed over Ilceto on their way from Africa to northern Europe. Occasionally flocks of wag-tails or redwings lingered to feed for a day or two and then flew on. Fruit trees blossomed, vineyards reddened, and once again oxen moved lazily through the fields, dragging wooden plows behind

them. With the warmer weather Alphonsus' health returned. He completed the petition to the king and sent it to Naples. By May he was well enough to preach a mission in Caposele.

"It will give you a chance to see the property I'm offering your institute," the bishop wrote. "You will find Caposele an excellent village. But come first to Conza so that we may talk the matter over."

Although the distance between Ilceto and Conza was not great, the journey was a hard one. Alphonsus still lacked his old vigor. The donkeys which the men rode climbed, descended, and climbed again, as the path penetrated ever deeper into the mass of mountains which separated the Apulian plain from Campania. The missionaries did not reach Conza until after nightfall of the third day. They stopped first at the village fountain to water their donkeys. There Alphonsus left his companions, and following his usual custom, went at once to the church.

As he knelt before the Blessed Sacrament the light from a cluster of votive candles illumined his thin, tired face and the tattered clothing which he wore.

A young priest coming to the door of the sacristy watched him for some time. He knew all the beggars of Conza. This man was not one of them, even though he was as ragged as they — too ragged certainly to be even a peddler. Strangers who appeared in the village after dark were likely to leave before sunrise; and given a good start, they could easily escape any pursuers by hiding in the mountain ravines. The young priest was conscientious. He could afford to take no chances. He went over to the kneeling stranger, who remained unaware of his presence. He spoke, but the stranger, with eyes fixed upon the tabernacle, did not hear. The young priest wondered if he was coveting the candlesticks. They were expensive ones. Overcoming with an effort his repugnance to beggars, known to be carriers of body lice and disease, he put his hand on Alphonsus' shoulder.

"Please leave the church," he said.

Alphonsus was startled by the intrusion. "I'm at my prayers."

"I can't help that. I'm about to lock the doors."

"I'm almost through, Father," Alphonsus explained. "May I have a few more minutes?"

Surprised by such gentleness, the priest hesitated. Had he made a mistake? Once more he sized up the stranger. No, he had seen men of that ilk before. "An altar cloth was stolen from here yesterday," he said bluntly. "We don't want to lose another tonight."

"Very well." Alphonsus got up and left the church.

It was fitting, he thought, that having been hailed as a saint in Foggia, he should be reviled as a thief in Conza. Confident that he was neither, he felt only amusement. He rejoined his companions at the fountain.

Later the same night he sat with the archbishop discussing the property at Caposele when their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of a young canon of the cathedral.

"I have a message for your Excell . . ." The canon stopped and stared at Alphonsus.

"Father Falconi," the archbishop said, "you're just in time to meet Father Liguori."

Overcome with confusion, the priest took a step forward, but as he was about to make an abject apology, he caught the expression in Alphonsus' eyes. It was one of both merriment and warning. The canon recognized at once that the warning was to save both him and the archbishop from embarrassment.

"Father Liguori?" the priest said. "I am unworthy of the honor."

"We are both unworthy of the honor," the archbishop added, happily surprised that his canon had phrased the compliment so well.

XIII

A YEAR PASSED. Since no action had been taken on his petition to the king, Alphonsus went to Naples. He called on Cardinal Spinelli, who had succeeded to the archbishopric on the death of Pignatelli, and he also saw the Marquis Brancone, an old friend who was now minister of ecclesiastical affairs. The latter arranged for him an audience with King Charles. Consequently, on a hot June day in 1747 Alphonsus stood outside the wall of the Castel Nuovo.

A uniformed guard at the gate scowled at him. "Move along," he ordered rudely. "No loiterers are allowed here."

"I've an appointment with the king," Alphonsus explained.

"That's not likely," the guard said. "Go away."

"The appointment is for eleven-thirty. It was arranged by the Marquis Brancone."

"Everyone tries to get in that way." The guard eyed the priest's dusty habit with suspicion. "There's only one appointment for the king this morning. That's with Father Alphonsus Liguori."

"But I am Alphonsus Liguori."

"It's possible, of course. In that case you should have a pass card, a letter, something. I can't afford to do you a favor at the cost of my own head."

Alphonsus produced a letter from the marquis, which the guard pretended to read, although he was in fact so illiterate that he could not even make out the signature. Since it looked authentic, he opened the gate and allowed Alphonsus to pass through.

Between the wall and the castle proper stretched a wide paved walk, flanked on either side with lawns laid out in flower beds. Alphonsus was familiar enough with court life to know that

usually there would be courtiers and retainers passing through the gardens and petitioners going in and out of the castle door. On this particular morning, however, no one was in sight.

"Everyone's taken cover," the guard warned him. "You'd better run if you don't want to get killed."

"I don't expect either assassins or enemy troops." Alphonsus was beginning to wonder if the gatekeeper was insane.

Yet he had scarcely started down the walk when a shot rang through the air. He stopped and, looking about, could see no one. At that moment a second shot was fired.

"Get out of the way!" the guard shouted.

Then Alphonsus looked up at the castle and saw, leaning from a turret window, a man in a scarlet hunting cap. He took the cap off, waved it at the figure in the courtyard below him and disappeared, leaving the window empty except for the muzzle of a gun. At the third shot Alphonsus covered as quickly as possible the remaining distance between him and the castle.

The king, he learned, was waiting for him in the turret. Ushered by a page, he climbed flight after flight of winding staircases which terminated at a door hung upon wrought-iron hinges. At the page's knock, the door opened and Alphonsus found himself face to face with a courtier whose head, surmounting a long, thin neck, was completely shaved. He wore no cravat, his waistcoat was unbuttoned, and his wig lay on a chair behind him.

The courtier giggled foolishly. "His Majesty is shooting," he said.

"I've discovered that," Alphonsus replied. "What is he trying to kill?"

"Pigeons."

"I didn't see any pigeons."

"They're on the wall. His Majesty enjoys many divine favors. When he has no time to go hawking, God sends game within range of his window."

"I have an appointment with him."

"Yes, I know. You must be Father Liguori."

Alphonsus bowed.

Giggling, the courtier bowed in return and led him into the turret room. There on his knees, the king was taking aim through the sight of a shotgun on the window ledge.

"Come over here and watch," he called to Alphonsus without looking around.

Alphonsus went over. The king fired and a pigeon fell.

"I seldom miss. A good eye and steady practice. You are Father Liguori?"

"Your humble servant." Alphonsus started to kneel.

"Don't be so formal." The king rose.

Alphonsus noticed that he was both tall and broad-shouldered. Compared to his giggling companion, he had an intelligent face. The chin was resolute, the nose insolently large and straight. But the forehead, which receded unpleasantly, would have spoiled these features had it not been hidden under the scarlet hunting cap.

"Put on your wig, Beni," the king said to his courtier. "Without it you remind me of my breakfast egg. I'm afraid of regurgitating."

The courtier giggled and made a kind of hopping movement toward the chair where his wig lay.

"I sent Your Majesty a petition . . ." Alphonsus began.

The king interrupted. "I know all about it. The marquis tells me you used to be a lawyer. What a pity you changed professions! We haven't a clever attorney in the kingdom except the one I brought from Tuscany, and priests swarm like mosquitoes in the Pontine Marshes. I should be shooting them instead of pigeons."

Now properly dignified by a full-bottom wig and a loosely tied neckcloth, the courtier hopped back into the orbit of conversation.

"There may be an abundance of priests in the city," Alphonsus admitted, "but the rural districts suffer a scarcity."

The king shrugged. "There aren't enough people there to make priests worth their keep. The marquis tells me you have four houses. Where are they located?"

"At Ciorani, Pagani, Ilceto and . . ."

"Ilceto!" The king's face brightened with interest. "What do

you know about the hunting around there? I've heard it's good."

"There's plenty of game for the hunter of souls, Your Majesty!"

"Birds! Birds! I'm talking about birds," the king said impatiently. He spoke as if he were reciting poetry. "The birds of Italy! I dream about them in my sleep. Do you realize, Father, the great diversity of our kingdom? Twice a year quail sweep down upon Castellamare and beg to be shot . . . Have you seen the villa I'm building there? At Capo-di-Monte fig-peckers come in August—thousands of them no bigger than warblers. But if you wait until they've fed for a while, they make a delicacy better than anything on the tables of Spain."

"Did you read the petition, Your Majesty?"

King Charles started like a man wakened from sleep. "What petition?"

"The petition requesting royal approbation for my institute."

"I'm a very busy man, Father Liguori. These matters are referred first to the grand almoner. Have you seen him?"

"I was told to come directly to you."

"By the Marquis Brancone, I suppose. He makes such a lot of fuss about nothing. Go to the grand almoner. He'll tell you what to do."

"I believe Your Majesty could handle the matter very quickly."

The king sighed and assumed an air of benevolence. "Yes, I suppose I could. On the other hand, it's wiser to let these small administrative matters be distributed among the ministers. I don't like a lot of useless baggage at court. See the grand almoner. Then the matter will come up before the royal council."

"How soon will it come up?" Alphonsus asked.

"Whenever it pleases His Majesty." The king was kneeling at the window again.

"I've waited a year."

"Father Liguori," the king said, his eye glued to the gunsight, "I'm a very busy man this morning. The grand almoner will tell you whatever you need to know. Meanwhile, find out about the hunting at Ilceto and let me know."

As Alphonsus left the turret room he heard first the giggling of the courtier and then a shot.

It was a week before Alphonsus could get an appointment with Msgr. Celestine Galiano, who was the king's grand almoner.

"There's no use coming to me," Galiano said grumpily. "I've already presented your petition to the royal council and nothing has come of it. I can do no more."

"Where is the petition now?" Alphonsus asked.

"Who knows, Father? It may be carefully put aside for future consideration. On the other hand it may be in some courtesan's boudoir."

"But there must be someone at court," Alphonsus insisted, "who can get action, either from the royal council or directly from the king."

Galiano agreed. "Tanucci is the man. He has real power, but it would be useless to see him. He wants to whittle the Church down, not build it up. I suggest you try Duke Sforza Cesarini."

Since the duke had once served as royal ambassador to Rome, the suggestion seemed a good one. Alphonsus applied to the duke's secretary and a meeting was arranged to take place on the garden terrace of the Palazzo Reale.

On the day and at the time agreed upon Alphonsus appeared. For more than an hour he read his breviary. Then he waited, pacing back and forth along the flagstone walks, looking across the harbor or down upon the arsenal immediately below. Hour after hour people came and went, but the duke never appeared. He had forgotten the appointment.

Alphonsus let ten days pass, hoping to receive a note of apology. When none came, he renewed his request for an interview. The duke once more arranged to meet him at the same place. This time he appeared, sparkling in white satin and gold braid.

At first the kindness of his manner was disarming. He had been interested in Father Liguori's activities for many years, he said. He had even read the *Meditations on the Blessed Sacra-*

ment. There was a time in his own life when he had considered giving up all the faldral of court life for a plain, simple cell in some monastery. It was true, he had been too weak to make the sacrifice. Now as he looked back over the years, he was sorry. He envied Father Liguori, whose face was not pimpled by excesses at table and who, although past middle life, did not have to lug a burden of fat around with him.

"It's a great nuisance," the duke said confidentially, patting himself in the appropriate place. "Would you believe it, I'm out of breath after climbing one flight of stairs. Some of it's fat, but there's a bit of gout too. I don't suppose you men who live on lentil soup have gout."

Alphonsus admitted they did not. He tried to bring the conversation back to the purpose of the meeting. "If we can't get royal approbation," he explained, "we're in danger of being suppressed at the king's pleasure. In that case, my lord, vast areas of the kingdom will be deprived of spiritual help."

"It's the monastic life which appeals to me," the duke said. "I've never thought much of mission work. You don't get anywhere by tossing bones to the canaries and bird seed to the dogs. How much good do you really think a missionary does? He comes, he goes and is forgotten."

"I think you'd change your mind," Alphonsus said, "if you could spend three weeks with us."

"I doubt it. Nevertheless, I am in sympathy with your work. I've heard you preach, and once long ago I heard you at the bar—a good orator lost to both Church and State. That, I regret."

"Msgr. Galiano tells me you have great influence with the king."

The duke shook his head. "He exaggerates. I was his ambassador to Rome on a fool's errand. As a result, whenever Charles sees me he's reminded of his folly and I get nowhere. Perhaps the Marquis Pallanti . . ." The duke stopped and stared. "Ho! Ho!" he cried in a high-pitched, delighted voice. "Look what's going by!" Then he uttered a soft, undulating whistle.

A brace of ladies, arm in arm, had just passed by. At the sound of the whistle they stopped. One turned her head ever so slightly in the duke's direction and lifted her fan.

The duke recognized the response. Without a word he followed the ladies.

Alphonsus was left alone. A minute passed before he realized what had happened. He could see the duke halfway down the terrace, with an arm around each tightly laced bodice. He was sparkling in white satin and gold braid. Of the senseless conversation which had been thus interrupted, Alphonsus could remember only one thing: the name of the Marquis Pallanti.

It was mid-July before he could get an appointment with the marquis, who received him in the dining room of his private apartment. He was eating breast of pheasant garnished with water cress and peppers.

A servant introduced Alphonsus and left him standing just inside the doorway. Since the marquis continued eating, without glancing at the petitioner, Alphonsus explained the purpose of his visit.

"I'm not interested," the marquis muttered, addressing his dinner plate.

"In that case," Alphonsus said, "I'm confident that your lordship, being a just man, will make yourself interested — for the sake of the neglected poor in our kingdom."

The marquis did not reply.

"It's only a matter of requesting the royal council to take action on my petition. A brief letter would suffice. This is simple justice, and God will reward you for the trouble."

The marquis said nothing.

"I beg you to do me this favor!"

At the urgency of Alphonsus' voice, the marquis looked up, revealing a face in which no glimmer of humanity could be discerned. It was like that of a corpse, bloodlessly pale, with set thin lips and eyes watery blue and empty.

"You are boring me," the marquis said.

"You gave me permission to come, my lord."

"A regrettable mistake. I dismiss you now."

Alphonsus did not move. "If you can't appeal to the royal council, will you see the king in my behalf?"

The marquis rose from the table and, brushing past Alphonsus as if no one were standing there, left the room.

A few minutes later his servant reappeared. "You have vexed the marquis with your effrontery," he said reproachfully. "I will show you the way out."

The days passed. Alphonsus made other appointments and called upon other ministers. As July drew to a close he was still in Naples. Then one day he received a summons from the grand almoner, and his hopes rose.

He found Msgr. Galiano in fine fettle. "Well, well, Father Liguori, I'm glad to see you. Sit down and tell me what's happened."

Alphonsus gave him a brief account of his futile attempts to obtain help. "I get nowhere," he concluded disconsolately, "and while I remain in Naples my community is neglected, my work is at a standstill. I've even had to turn over some of my mission work to clerics too inexperienced for the task."

"Now, now, now," said Galiano. "You're impatient. These things take time. What seems important to you may appear only incidental to men who carry on their shoulders the burdens of government."

"Such as pigeons, whoredom, and gluttony," Alphonsus commented bitterly.

The grand almoner pursed his mouth. "At any rate, I sent for you because I have a solution. For some years, Father, I've been protector of a new religious community which is doing fine work here in Naples. In fact, I have its interests much at heart. It's the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament." He paused for a response. When none came, he said, "I think you know Father Vincent Mannarini. Wasn't he with you at one time?"

Alphonsus nodded. "Yes, Monsignor, I know him. I understand his institute is doing well."

"Remarkably well. He's a fine man, Father, and so is Tosquez. I shouldn't be surprised if some day they'll both be added to our calendar of saints. Such dedicated men!" Again he paused for the response that did not come. "That, of course, is neither here nor there. Now Father Mannarini has been generous enough to offer you a great benefit. He's willing to merge his community with yours. 'Wonderful! Wonderful!' I told him. As protector of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, I expect to push their request for approbation through at once. If you merge with him, your request will go with it and all your problems will be solved." He leaned back in his chair and beamed with satisfaction.

"We aren't interested in merging, Monsignor."

"Why, how does that happen? Mannarini tells me you are."

"It's true that Mannarini has suggested it. But surely, Monsignor, you can see the impossibility. The Blessed Sacrament Fathers establish houses in cities. We're devoted to rural districts. They are founding schools. We give missions. Our activities are entirely different."

"So much the better, Father. The more diverse your activities are, the more you will accomplish."

"How can we have a common rule when the very purpose of our existence differs?"

"I wouldn't worry about that. Everything will work out in the course of time." Msgr. Galiano spoke as if the merger were already agreed upon.

"But the rule of our own institute would be destroyed in the process."

"No, no, Father. Expanded, not destroyed. Frankly, in view of Tanucci's attitude toward the Church, I can do no more than get one institute approved. My first interests are with the Blessed Sacrament. I'm offering you this solution as the last resort."

"I understand." Alphonsus caught his breath and exhaled with a thin, rasping sound.

"You must have asthma," the grand almoner said.

"A little now and then." Alphonsus felt as if he were suffocating.

"Father Mannarini is determined upon this merger. Don't disappoint him."

Realizing that an acute attack of asthma was at hand, Alphonsus needed to conclude the interview. "Thank you for the suggestion," he said, struggling for breath. "I'll think the matter over and let you know."

He left hastily. Once in the street he leaned his shoulder against the side of a building and placed his head in the peculiar position which usually gave him relief. The veins of his forehead were distended, perspiration rolled down his face. Thus he remained for nearly an hour. A couple of snarling dogs jostled against him, but he did not move. A young woman, accompanied by her footman, passed, hesitated and returned to press an alms into his hand. He remained as if transfixed. Gradually the spasm subsided, his respiration returned to normal, and he began slowly walking up the Toledo in the direction of Marianella, where he had been staying.

Anna Caterina, now an old woman, sat all day by the window telling her beads. She could not remember why Alphonsus was at home, but that did not matter. When he appeared she felt happy and young again. When he left, she merely waited in placid silence for his return. Her eyesight was failing, so that she could no longer distinguish whether he was gay or sad, in good health or in ill. Her grasp on reality had become so slight that their conversation was necessarily limited to the seasoning of the meat, the aphids infesting the roses, or the consolations of prayer.

"I've said ten rosaries," she announced when Alphonsus returned that night. "Five for your father and five for you. Or did I say five? I was going to, but then the poulterer came and I lost count."

"I'm sure you said them all, Mother. And thank you." Alphonsus kissed her and went to his room.

The next morning he sent a letter to Ciorani presenting the grand almoner's proposal. The balance of the day he spent in

the Church of Our Lady of Ransom, where he had first renounced the world. The dilemma in which he found himself was so lacking in any satisfactory solution that he wondered whether it came from God or from Satan. The grand almoner had made it sufficiently clear that he must choose the merger or give up all hope for royal approbation. If he complied, some remnant of his labor might be saved. If he refused, everything would certainly be destroyed. Until nightfall he prayed in a spirit of aridity. Then he returned home.

The following week Father Villani wrote from Ciorani merely to reassure him that the community would abide by whatever decision he made. In the end, he chose what seemed the lesser of two evils. Heavyhearted, he met with Mannarini, Tosquez, and the grand almoner to work out a plan for merger. A joint petition was drawn up and Galiano in high spirits promised that approbation would soon follow.

XIV

EARLY IN AUGUST of the same year Alphonsus received a summons from the Marquis Brancone, Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs. He answered it at once.

He found the marquis, erect in his high-backed chair, nibbling at a white fig.

Alphonsus bowed. "You called for me, my lord."

The Marquis nodded and gestured to a chair. "I did. I hear you sold out to Mannarini."

"You make it sound like treason," Alphonsus said, sitting down. "I thought it was prudence. After approbation we can, I hope, go our own ways with a double rule, and perhaps in a year or two we may manage a peaceful separation."

The marquis grunted. "Not if I know Mannarini. He's got what he wanted and he's not likely to let go of it."

"By that time he may be sick of the bargain."

"And you may no longer be interested."

"Interested in separation?" Alphonsus asked.

"No, in what happens to the community."

"May the Lord have mercy on me, if I'm not!"

As the marquis reached for another fig, the ruby on his forefinger caught the sunlight and glowed like fire. "How long has your institute been in existence now?"

"Fifteen years."

"Long enough for it to be stable. If anything happened to you, the work would go on, and you'd still be remembered as the founder."

"It's not sustained by me, but by the grace of God."

"Of course. How many members have you?"

"Twenty professed."

"Fine! And I suppose you're training someone to succeed you?"

"You tease me with questions. It's true I have asthma, my lord, but it's not apt to be fatal."

The Marquis laughed outright. "Forgive me, Father. I didn't invite you here in order to tease you. Rather I have a surprise."

Alphonsus manifested slight interest. During his weeks in the city he had grown increasingly skeptical that any good could come from ministers of state. "Thus far the only surprises which Naples has given me are nightmares."

"This one isn't." The marquis chuckled. "It's the end of every priest's desire."

"Then it must be heaven," Alphonsus said, smiling in his turn.

"Almost. It's the Archbishopric of Palermo!"

Alphonsus turned sickly pale. "My dear friend, what have you done!"

"It's quite all right. I was glad to do it. I caught Charles in a good moment. He'd just come from hunting, with enough game to glut the market. Had I asked it, I think he would have given me the Holy See."

"Then why didn't you ask him for the approbation?"

The marquis was startled. "Come to think of it, it never occurred to me."

"May the Lord pardon you!" Alphonsus cried. "I don't want a bishopric. I have no ambitions."

"Of course you have no ambitions. It's in bad taste for the clergy to have them. But human nature is no different under a cassock. You may — for the sake of propriety — demur at first and then accept reluctantly."

Alphonsus felt his temper rising. It was almost as if he were confronting his father again. At the same time he realized that his friend had acted in good faith. "Thank you for your kindness," he said, getting up. "I've dedicated my life to one kind of work, and I don't wish to undertake another."

This reaction was something the marquis had not anticipated. It was beyond his comprehension. "Are you serious?" he asked in bewilderment.

"Very serious. A bishopric would be a disaster."

"Then you refuse the king's offer?"

"I do."

"That also is a disaster. His Majesty doesn't like to have favors rejected. Suppose you offend him?"

"I'd rather offend His Majesty than offend God." For a moment Alphonsus felt helpless, not knowing what to do. Then he bowed to kiss the marquis' hand. "Thank you for your kindness. I don't underestimate it, but I'm committed to something else."

"I'm sorry," the marquis said, equally at a loss.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Alphonsus answered. "Even the best of friends sometimes fail to understand one another."

For a long time after Alphonsus had gone, the Marquis Brancone sat in his straight-backed chair, holding a white fig in his hand. "Poor fool! Poor fool!" he muttered over and over.

On the twenty-second of August the joint petition of Fathers Liguori and Mannarini came up before the royal council. The discussion was short, the council voted against the petition and the king confirmed that vote. Alphonsus returned to Ciorani, discouraged, yet reassured that merger with the Blessed Sacrament Fathers was not God's will. At the same time an increasing fear tugged at his heart. Since King Charles had allocated to himself the right of controlling ecclesiastical affairs throughout the kingdom, he might, at any moment and without recourse to Rome, put an end to the institute. Then the four houses would be closed and their members dispersed. The property at Ilceto might provide His Majesty with a convenient hunting lodge. Perhaps Charles already had some such thing in mind. Alphonsus gave no outward indication of such thoughts. He devoted the next six months to giving missions. During the heavy December rains he went on foot northward through the mountains to visit Ilceto. From there, he journeyed still farther north to preach a novena at Troia.

In January, back at Ciorani, he was composing a new treatise — *The Glories of Mary* — to defend the Blessed Virgin against the

attacks of Jansenism. The first edition of the *Moral Theology* was just off the press, and Alphonsus had already written Joseph Remondini, his publisher in Venice, to explain that he would accept no profits from the book. This was a decision which, once made, he never changed. Many years later he was to write the same publisher: "I want nothing for selling these books. . . . I have had nothing printed for the sake of gain. . . . I am not a merchant."

In February he had a letter from the Marquis Brancone, who had been at great pains to rectify his earlier mistake. The king, he said, had taken the rejection of the archbishopric as nothing more than a joke; Alphonsus apparently had nothing to fear from that. Furthermore, His Majesty of late had been opposed primarily to the establishment of new congregations, not to the continuation of those already in existence. The marquis therefore suggested that Alphonsus submit a second petition, asking merely for approbation of the four houses already founded and omitting all mention of approval for the institute as a whole. Alphonsus consequently returned to Naples. This time King Charles received him in the customary audience chamber and with due respect, promising to discuss the matter with the royal council and to come to some decision within a month. Alphonsus waited and prayed.

In the interim he became acquainted with Msgr. Joseph Puoti, a private chamberlain of the pope, who had been sent to Naples on a secret mission. Like Alphonsus, he too had met with stubborn resistance everywhere. Common problems drew the two men together. Besides, Alphonsus liked this tall, dark-eyed young priest who went about his business with such quiet self-assurance that even the most vulgar of Neapolitan officials found it impossible to discountenance him.

The monsignor was staying at the monastery of Santa Chiara, and there one bleak March day Alphonsus found him walking briskly up and down the windswept cloisters, reading his breviary. They sat together on the low stone wall and chatted confidentially.

"With all your experience in the word as a lawyer," the mon-

signor said, "I should think you could manage these Neapolitan nobles with a twitch of the reins."

"If I ever had that knack," Alphonsus replied, "I've lost it."

"Is it that, Father, or do you refuse to play the game?"

"Perhaps it's both. After fifteen years among simple mountain folk one loses touch with the vices of sophistication."

For a while the two men listened in silence to the dry ivy leaves moving restlessly in the wind.

Then the monsignor resumed the conversation. "At least you've only one Bourbon to plague you. The Holy Father has five. Their ministers close in on him like a pack of wolves—all of them of the French school of philosophy, determined to destroy the Church. If he tosses anything their way, the world cries out that he's sold the Kingdom of God for a mess of pottage. If he refuses, it accuses him of a lust for power. In the end the winner is neither Church nor State, but the emissaries of Satan. Poor Benedict! Charles isn't his worst problem by any means." The monsignor was young and emotional.

Listening to him, Alphonsus felt ashamed. "Forgive me for complaining. Still, the gates of hell won't prevail against Benedict. My community has no such assurance. The king can disperse us as easily as he can shoot down a pigeon."

"You must prevent that," the monsignor said.

"I wish I could."

"Why don't you go to Rome and apply for papal approbation?"

"As soon as I have the king's approval, I will."

"Need you wait for that, Father? Do you think Benedict will like you any better for having won the friendship of Charles? He might like you less."

Alphonsus had never looked at the matter in that way. "I assumed the Holy Father wouldn't approve an institute that had no surety of surviving."

"You may be right." The monsignor hesitated. Then he said, "However, in the chess game of diplomacy, a wise man is not afraid to resort to the gambits."

"And the wise man," Alphonsus suggested, "will choose his time with care."

"The time, Father, is now."

"Now?"

The monsignor nodded. "Yes, now — when you are the most talked of man in Rome."

"I? That's nonsense! I've scarcely been heard of in Rome."

Alphonsus' surprise was so ingenuous that Msgr. Puoti smiled. "Your *Moral Theology*, Father, has been passed from hand to hand. When Cardinal Rezzonico gave it to the Pope, he prophesied that some day it would be as important in its own field as the *Summa*."

"The Cardinal," Alphonsus said with distaste, "must be a man of very poor judgment. Furthermore, if I know Charles, once we have papal approval, he may suppress us just for spite — like bringing down a skylark simply because it's singing."

Msgr. Puoti got up from the wall and walked a short distance down the cloister. Then he came back. "Father, you always think of yourself as a Neapolitan."

"But I am a Neapolitan. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because the Church is bigger than that."

"You can hardly equate me with the Church, Monsignor. Besides my whole work lies here in the Kingdom of Naples, helping the poor."

"Ah, but you forget! The poor are scattered to the ends of the earth. You're founding a religious order which, by God's grace, may reach them too. The virtue of humility can sometimes blind us. Don't think of today or tomorrow, but of the next hundred years. Then you'll see that you must build some security, so that if you're suppressed in Naples, you can go elsewhere. Such is the prudence of the world, whose children 'are wiser in their generation than the children of light.'"

"So you want me to make friends of the mammon of iniquity?" Alphonsus asked.

"I'm not thinking of the Neapolitan court." The monsignor's tone was bantering. "I'm thinking of Voltaire!"

"Voltaire!" Alphonsus laughed lightly, for the name came into their conversation with unexpected incongruity. "I think I shan't write to that devil."

"Some priests have, of course," the monsignor said, "and come off rather the worse for it. I didn't mean that. But even though he's a devil, he's a wise one and knows how to save his own skin. No longer welcome in France, he moved just across the border into the Duchy of Lorraine. There he was safe from prosecution, yet able to re-enter France at any time. It paid off in the end."

A house outside the kingdom! Almost at once the idea crystallized, and Alphonsus said, "Beneventum."

"Perhaps," the monsignor answered.

The future now seemed incredibly clear. Although the Duchy of Beneventum lay between Naples and Foggia, in the very heart of Campania, it had been an independent papal state for nearly seven hundred years. A house there could, if necessary, become a place of refuge — temporary refuge surely, for Charles would not live forever, and the gates of hell . . .

The monsignor's voice interrupted these thoughts. "Have you ever been to Rome?"

"Never."

"Well, you'll find the sycophants in the Vatican no better than those in Naples. More than one prelate wears a cardinal's hat because some dissipated sovereign demanded it. Yet there's a difference. In Rome the worms are eating their way into an apple whose core remains uncorrupted. Forget about royal approbation, Father, and go to Rome."

A few days later Alphonsus received word that his request for royal approbation had been denied. This time, intercepted by Tanucci, it was killed before reaching the royal council. Once again he returned to Ciorani.

During most of that summer Alphonsus was ill, and when autumn came he still lacked strength for a trip to Rome. Consequently, he sent Father Andrew Villani in his place.

"I'll be as shy as a rabbit," Villani complained with his usual diffidence, "and as stupid."

"The Blessed Virgin will give you boldness, and the Holy Ghost will make you wise," Alphonsus promised.

From Rome Villani wrote frequently, and his letters justified Msgr. Puoti's warning. There were political intrigues everywhere — vanities to be flattered, ambitions to be satisfied — and the case of a handful of priests in the Kingdom of Naples seemed remote and unimportant to the Roman prelates. Villani compensated for his limited experience by dogged persistence. He called upon each of the cardinals personally. He sought help wherever he could find it. He was determined not to leave the city until his task was done.

In February, 1749, when he had been absent for four months, the community bell at Ciorani rang out with the vigor of a village fire alarm. Priests and lay brothers dropped the work they were doing and hastened down the corridors to the general chapter room. There they found Alphonsus prostrate on the floor, a letter from Villani in his hand. His body, which had been weakened by illness, shook with sobs.

Father Sportelli knelt beside him. "What has happened? Did you fall, Father? Come, let me help you up." He turned to the priests who had gathered around him and asked in consternation, "Who rang the bell anyway?"

"I did," Alphonsus said, letting himself be raised from the floor. "I didn't fall. I was only thanking God."

"With lamentations?" Sportelli asked.

Alphonsus handed him the letter. For the benefit of all the community Sportelli read aloud the opening sentence: "Glory to God, the congregation is approved."

Thus the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, or the Redemptorists, officially came into existence.

When Villani returned from Rome, Alphonsus had only one complaint. "You must go back to Rome and get the brief of approbation amended," he insisted.

Villani blanched. "What's wrong, Father?"

"I should never have been designated 'perpetual rector major.' That's what's wrong."

"But, Father, you know . . ."

"Yes, I know and so do you. My health and disposition are both gone, and at my age they aren't likely to return. In a few more years your rector major will be suffering from senility, and you'll have no way to get rid of him."

"God wants you to carry this cross until death," Villani said. "We can't oppose His will."

"His will or yours? I wonder!"

Villani hid his amusement, and for once he assumed the tone of spiritual director. "Father, this has been decided. Let us not speak of the matter again."

XV

KING CHARLES reclined upon a huge pile of cushions, while his gondoliers skillfully maneuvered their boat away from the royal dock and into the wide blue Bay of Naples. As the expanse of water broadened behind them, the sunlit village of Castellamare diminished and gradually disappeared. Ahead of them, above the sparkling bay, rose Vesuvius. It was the year 1752. The king had been hunting quail, and now after several days of strenuous exercise, he felt indolent and at peace with the world.

"So," he said, stretching languidly and turning to the Marquis Brancone, "I'll soon be back in Naples, with a hundred petitioners yapping at my heels. Those were peaceful days when I had nothing but the Duchy of Parma to worry about."

"One petitioner is already in Naples waiting for you."

"Another young whippersnapper who wants preferment at court, I suppose. Who is he?"

"Father Alphonsus Liguori."

"Father Liguori?" The king scowled. "I owe him nothing. I offered him the See of Palermo. What does he want now?"

"Approbation for his institute."

"Well, he won't get it. I'm sick of his one-track mind." The king turned to one of the pages. "Hand me my snuffbox."

The box was produced, and the king set himself to the business of poking snuff into his nostrils. "This time I'll settle the matter once and for all."

"How?" Brancone asked.

"I'll suppress the whole . . ." The sentence was interrupted by a fit of sneezing.

The Marquis lifted his eyebrows. "Really? The Holy See has given its approval."

"A lot I care about that."

"When Father Liguori came to Naples five years ago," Brancone said, careful to appear casual, "he was just another priest. Since then the situation has changed."

"He's just another priest to me."

"Nevertheless, Your Majesty, he's gained a great reputation."

"Reputation? That little beggar? What are you talking about?"

"Almost every literate Catholic knows his devotional works. He's written a dozen of them. Rome esteems him for his *Moral Theology*. And his *Annotations to the Medulla of Busembaum* . . ."

"The medulla of Busembaum! The medulla of Busembaum!" The king shrieked with delight. "Hurrah for Busembaum!" He lay back upon the cushions, convulsed with laughter.

"I'm happy to afford Your Majesty so much amusement," the crestfallen Marquis managed to say.

The king paid no attention. He was waving his hand back and forth as if it were a baton and repeating rhythmically, "The medulla of Busembaum, the medulla of Busembaum." Then he fell silent.

Knowing further conversation was impossible, the Marquis relaxed and looked out to sea.

Some fifteen minutes later the king roused himself. "When we get back to Naples you may tell your little priest that His Majesty's favorites are not theologians."

"Sometimes I wonder what you have against them — particularly against Father Liguori." The marquis was still staring at the waves.

"He nags at me."

"Once in five years?"

"Yes."

"If you'd give him approbation, he'd stop nagging."

"Then I'd be in trouble with Tanucci."

"You'll have to admit," Brancone said smiling, "that Father Liguori hardly resembles the fatted calf which Tanucci is so fond of calling the clergy."

"Give his institute approbation and he will."

A red-sailed fishing boat was passing at some distance from the gondola. The king reached for the speaking trumpet which he kept beside him, and putting it to his mouth, he called out, "Greetings from the King of Naples! May you have a full catch!"

The fishermen, who had already recognized the royal flag, were gathered at the stern. Their voices, however, failed to carry. So they made gestures of obeisance, and Charles waved gaily in return.

Behind the fishing boat came a scattering of white gulls. They rose and dipped and rose again. Then both fishing boat and birds were gone.

"The work Father Liguori is doing . . . "

"Don't talk to me about it," the king snapped. "I'm tired of priests who pretend poverty. Besides, my mind is made up. I shall accept no petition."

So the marquis diverted the conversation to other topics. Time passed, the sun shifted, and the canopy over the gondola was readjusted to keep off the heat. For a while Charles slept among his cushions. Then he wakened and called for an orange. He bit into the fruit, sucked once and tossed it into the water.

Brancone was patient. He timed his second attempt carefully. When the lighthouse on the Molo Angioino appeared and he knew the trip was almost ended, he opened the subject again, this time with flattery.

"Your Majesty is a wise man. Will you answer me a riddle?"

Charles melted. "Even a king's wisdom has limitations."

"I doubt if yours has," Brancone said. "Tell me, if a staghound is overfed, how do you condition him for hunting again? Do you take away all his food?"

"Good heavens, no!" the king cried. "You cut down his daily rations. When you've got him back to the size you want, it's easy enough to keep him there."

"That's what I thought."

"A silly question. Have you overfed your dog?"

"No." Brancone studied his well-manicured fingernails. "I've

just been thinking — but I don't want to trouble Your Majesty."

The king's curiosity was aroused. "Out with it! You were thinking what?"

"That Your Majesty could treat Father Liguori in the same way."

"By putting him on short rations?"

"Exactly. You could approve the institute on your own terms."

"And what would my terms be?" the king asked, attracted by the suggestion.

"First, that the institute acquire no more property; second, that the four houses now existing be placed under diocesan control."

The king grunted. "Four houses are too much for those sheep to batten on."

"If the bishops received a right to all revenues accruing from the institute and the priests were paid merely some nominal sum for maintenance . . ."

A soft, vulgar oath escaped the king's lips. "By God, Brancone, you've a good head!" He lapsed into silence. Then he said, "One more condition: no donations, no inheritances, no bequests. Let's keep them poor."

The gondola now lay close to the dock, where a line of royal servants waited to attend the king. An uneasy conscience made the Marquis Brancone very unhappy; yet he knew that he had saved the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer from extinction.

Alphonsus was grateful to him. Furthermore, being now certain that his order could not spread within the kingdom, he made plans to found a house in the Duchy of Beneventum. Three years later he acquired property there, and a new foundation was made in the village of Sant' Angelo a Cupola.

In 1756 Alphonsus returned to Naples, this time with a new petition for approbation. At the age of sixty, worn out by years of ill-health and overwork, he feared his life was drawing to a close. He could not leave his institute saddled with the disabilities which the king had forced upon it. Tired and sick as he was, he dragged himself through the same tedious, humiliating routine

of calling upon ministers of state, interviewing princes and dukes and prelates, enduring insults and indifference.

Finally someone sent him to the Marquis Frangiani, an obese, slovenly man who received him from a tester bed with the velvet curtains drawn back. On a table nearby lay a pile of dirty breakfast dishes. Across the foot of the bed slept a spaniel whose flanks were bald from mange.

The marquis grumpily protested against the corruption of the clergy and the wealth of the Church.

"My congregation has not been founded to make money," Alphonsus explained, "but to save souls."

"You can tell that to old women," the marquis growled, "but not to me." He pulled the bed sheet over his head and lay like a dirty, rumpled mountain.

Alphonsus waited.

"Go away," said the voice under the sheet. "Go away and let me sleep."

"My lord," answered Alphonsus, feeling as if he were addressing a corpse in a winding sheet, "I recommend to you the business of Jesus Christ."

The marquis threw back the sheet and raised himself on his elbows to shout, "Jesus Christ has no business in the royal chamber." Then he covered himself again.

"Nor in this chamber either," Alphonsus commented as he took his leave.

The following week his petition was refused.

XVI

SIX YEARS LATER Alphonsus was riding along the highroad between Pagani and Naples. The road was filled with rattling carts, slow-footed, overladen beasts, and jostling people who paid no attention to the little old man on the donkey. They could scarcely have guessed that he was one of the most famous scholars in all Europe — author of half a hundred moral, ascetical and theological works.* Had they been told, they would have shaken their heads with bovine lack of comprehension. Everyone going toward the city was talking about something of far more importance — the big boats which had left Torre del Greco that morning for the coral fisheries off the coast of Africa. Everyone coming away from the city was talking about Ferdinand, who had been crowned King of Naples when Charles succeeded to the Spanish throne. The boy had been eight years old at that time. Now, in 1762, he was eleven — a husky, unmanageable fellow who gave his aging regents

* During the brief period referred to above (1756-1761) Alphonsus had published the following: 1756: *Answer to a Critic of Glories of Mary; Counsels to Young Confessors; Short Dissertation against Materialists and Deists*. 1757: *Instruction and Practice for a Confessor; Help to the Priest Assisting the Dying; Examination of Candidates for Ordination; Note or Addition Regarding Cursing the Dead; A Rule for Seminarians; Short Treatise on the Necessity, Efficacy and Conditions of Prayer*. 1758: *Preparation for Death; Discourse for Calamitous Times; Novena for Christmas; Novena in Honor of the Sacred Heart; Meditations on St. Joseph; Preparation for and Thanksgiving after Mass for Priests; Reply Concerning the Abuse of Cursing the Dead*. 1759: *Dissertation on the Just Prohibition of Bad Books; The Greatest Means of Prayer*. 1760: *The True Spouse of Jesus Christ; Selva or Collection of Material for Priests; Short Instructions on the Rules of a Mission; Mass and Office Hastily Said*. 1761: *Way of the Cross; Considerations and Affections on the Passion; Meditations for a Private Retreat of Eight Days; Letter to a Religious on Apostolic Preaching*.

Yet these years were no more prolific than those which preceded and followed them. Furthermore, the three volume *Moral Theology* had gone into a second edition as early as 1753.

more trouble than the whole kingdom. On this particular morning he had appeared in the Piazza Reale hawking at the top of his voice a string of fish he had caught in Lake Fusaro. He screamed and kicked when the servants tried to take him away, causing such a commotion that the Prince of San Nicandro, who attended his health, had him forcibly removed.

Alphonsus cared nothing about all this exchange of news. The accession of the boy king had not mattered to him, since the ministers of state remained unchanged and Tanucci still ruled the kingdom. What did matter was that a new man sat on the papal throne in Rome. Clement XIII was unlike his predecessor. Rather than conciliate the Bourbons, he fought alone, fearlessly and uncompromisingly, against all the forces of an ungodly world. Yet he had not wanted to be the Vicar of Christ. First he had wept over it, then he had become ill and unhappy.

Alphonsus was also ill and unhappy. His dilapidated hat failed to conceal the hollow eyes and sunken cheeks beneath it. He was threadbare as well. His habit was patched in half a dozen places. His shoes were worn through. The vow of poverty, for him, embraced also the virtues of humility and detachment. As long as the old clothing still covered his body, he saw no reason save pride for replacing it. Thus he rode, slowly toward Naples, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, his mind occupied with one recurring thought: "God has sent me into exile as a punishment for my sins." In his day few men survived the age of sixty-five. Yet he, already past that mark, was expected to begin a new life in strange surroundings, cut off from his companions, his work, the religious order he had founded — and all because Clement XIII, good man that he was, insisted that Alphonsus Liguori become Bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths, a diocese located some twenty-eight miles north of Naples and midway between Caserta and Beneventum.

For twenty years Alphonsus had lived in a state of homelessness, first going from one village to another preaching missions; then as rector major of his congregation, living in one house after another. At last in 1751 he had settled permanently at Pagani, not by choice,

but because the house of studies was located there and he was teaching his *Moral Theology* to the students. During those last ten years Pagani had become home. He had even prayed that in his old age he might die there.

No wonder he had protested to Rome his elevation to the episcopate. He had prayed and mortified his flesh to such an extent that he had fallen ill and been given the last sacraments. After that he had asked for death. But his prayers had been to no avail, and now he must go from Naples to Rome for his consecration, and from Rome to his unwanted diocese.

There was little in Naples to make him happy. Anna Caterina had died, and so had many of his old friends. A bright new clergy supplanted the men he had once known and loved. Even the external aspects of the city had changed. Behind the Palazzo Reale stood the tremendous San Carlos Theatre, which Charles had hoped would be the biggest opera house in all Europe. Above the city at Capo-di-Monte was the king's porcelain factory and not far from it what resembled a great heap of ruins, but was in fact an unfinished castle begun merely because His Majesty enjoyed shooting the fig-peckers in that neighborhood. Radiating out from the city stretched broad new roads. With no regard for the location of villages or the convenience of the farmers, they terminated abruptly and uselessly at royal hunting lodges. What remained unchanged in Naples were the filth and degradation of the poor and the splendid arrogance of the rich.

For Alphonsus, coming back to the city meant the painful stirring of old memories. He had done so little for the poor. He had suffered so many humiliations from the splendid arrogance of the rich. Now his health was broken and his spirit was like the heavy, flightless weight of a dead bird. How could the Holy Father expect him to be successful in administering a diocese? It seemed to him that his life had been marked for failure. It was true, of course, that his institute now had more than a hundred priests and a good many lay brothers as well. And they had been busy, conducting half a hundred missions a year and

nearly that many retreats in their own five houses. Nonetheless, they still suffered the crippling effects of the king's anticlericalism. They had been forced to turn down two properties recently offered them; and in spite of urgent invitations from Sicily, they dared not establish any permanent residence there. Wherever they turned, expansion met with obstacles.

Alphonsus suddenly realized that he had reached the heart of the city. Avoiding the Toledo, he guided his donkey into a side street flanked by small bazaars. He had been there many times before when he had preached on the street corners to thieves and *lazzaroni*. Consequently he knew of a certain jewelry shop—a dark, windowless hole scooped out at the ground level of a tenement wall—where a gray-bearded Jew invited Gentile trade by displaying cheap crucifixes, gaudy rosaries, and a variety of religious claptrap. From him Alphonsus purchased a plated ring set with a piece of colored glass. As he tried it on the third finger of his right hand, he smiled with amusement. The amusement faded, however, when he lifted an equally unattractive pectoral cross strung on green cord.

"How heavy!" he exclaimed.

"Heavy? My good Father," the shopkeeper protested, "it's as light as a feather. It's only painted tin."

Alphonsus shook his head. "It's heavy. I know of nothing more crushing."

He paid for his purchases and left.

From the doorway the Jew watched him mount his donkey. "Poor crack-brained old man!" he thought.

In Rome Alphonsus submitted to the congratulations of cardinals and other church dignitaries. Prelates were eager to meet the author who had so vigorously attacked materialistic deism. Rectors of seminaries were grateful for his instructions to young confessors. One abject little priest on his first visit to Rome refused to leave the city until he had thanked Alphonsus for his pamphlets against cursing the dead—an abuse among his parishioners which, he admitted, he had long neglected. Now he had them praying for

the salvation of those they had once hoped to see damned. Alphonsus received these praises as indifferently as if they were intended for someone else. Although he ate sparingly at the banquets given in his honor, he endured them with good grace. In fact, he accepted everything except the expenses of his elevation. These were customarily defrayed by the newly consecrated bishops themselves. But when Alphonsus was presented with his bill, he refused it. "I didn't ask for the episcopacy," he said. "It was imposed upon me. Shall I pay with revenues which belong to the poor?" Clement merely laughed and paid the fees from his own purse. Later he remarked, "When Alphonsus Liguori dies, there will be one more saint in heaven."

It was July. In the episcopal palace at St. Agatha of the Goths there was a big to-do among the servants. The cook, a heavy peasant of the neighborhood, slammed the pots noisily. "What am I supposed to do?" she complained bitterly to the coachman. "Stand here all day? He was up before daybreak, yet he hasn't said Mass, he hasn't ordered his breakfast. Where is he anyway?"

"In chapel praying." The coachman was dangling his legs from a high kitchen stool. "What are you complaining about? Not enough work? I suppose you'd like to be in my place, wearing my knuckles to the bone cleaning out the stable for His Excellency's fine horses; and he comes jogging along in a carriage drawn by two mules, with a lay brother astride a flea-bitten donkey; and the crowds all around him as if he was the Lord going up to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Oh, I daresay the carriage is good enough. But two mules and a donkey! *Dio mio!* Does he expect me to be a mule driver?"

"They say he's a saint," the cook said. "If it's true, I don't like it." She began passing flour through a sieve over an open bin. She could at least make the pastries.

At that moment the housekeeper came in, sputtering like a hot skillet. "What is the household coming to!"

"Are you complaining too?" the coachman asked.

"I went up to make His Excellency's bed. God save us, what do you think?"

"We've stopped thinking," the cook snapped.

"The bed was just as I'd fixed it yesterday — the curtains drawn back, the coverlet all smooth."

"So he makes his own bed!" The coachman shook his head in disapproval.

"No, he doesn't." With her hands on her hips, the housekeeper faced them triumphantly. "He doesn't use a bed!"

The cook dropped her sieve. "He doesn't use one! Where does he sleep?"

"On the floor — on a sack!"

The three servants looked at one another with expressions of consternation and disgust.

"Where is he now?" the cook asked.

"He's been saying Mass for the last hour. It takes him three times as long as anyone else. Maybe he has trouble with his Latin."

Thus Alphonsus found them: the cook's hands white with flour dust, the housekeeper's clutching a broom, and the coachman's fiddling with a leather crop he had brought from the stables. They stood at attention, with their eyes upon the floor.

"Is Your Excellency ready for breakfast?" the cook asked.

"Thank you. I take no breakfast." Alphonsus' eyes danced somewhat merrily from one forlorn face to another. Then he noticed the sieve. "What are you preparing?"

"Tarts for dinner, Your Excellency."

"Since you've already sifted the flour," Alphonsus said, "you may bake them, and the three of you have a feast. At the bishop's table fruit will be enough."

"But, Your Excellency . . ."

The sound of singing came through the open door to the kitchen garden, and a peasant appeared. He was a long-nosed fellow who carried a live goose by the feet. "I brought you the fattest in the flock," he chirped to the cook. "But I promise you'll

find him as tender as a pullet." He glanced at the stranger in the patched habit, presuming he was one of those transient beggars who frequent the kitchen doors of rectories. "Did the bishop come?" he asked. "I wager he's a good fat one too — as fat as the goose."

"You're mistaken," Alphonsus put in. "I'm that unfortunate man."

"What man, Brother?" The peasant was none too bright.

"The bishop."

The fellow tweaked his nose and let out a high-pitched squeal. "You the bishop! I'm not as blind as a bat. I can tell a bishop from a poor friar better than a goose from a groundhog. But you came on the right day, Brother, for we do have a new . . ." He stopped transfixed, his eyes glued upon the ring with the colored glass setting. Then he uttered a series of strange, inarticulate sounds and sank to his knees. "God forgive me. I'll go straight to hell! Sure as my wife's always told me, I'll go straight to hell. O Your Excellency, forgive me!"

Alphonsus let him kiss the ring and blessed him. "You've done nothing wrong. God knows I'd rather be taken for a friar than a bishop. Now get up. The cook will pay you for the goose, but hereafter we dine on simpler fare."

"As Your Excellency wishes," the cook said. She paid for the goose, and the peasant, red with embarrassment, ducked out of the doorway.

"In the future," Alphonsus explained, "we'll have soup and boiled meat for dinner. Cheese and fruit afterward."

"What else, Your Excellency?"

"Nothing. The diocese is poor. It's more important to feed others well than to pamper ourselves." He hoped for some flicker of approval in the eyes of the servants, but seeing none, he continued. "Beginning tomorrow morning the house bell will ring at six. At six-thirty everyone — priests, secretaries, servants — will be in chapel for the little hours of the office. Each afternoon the cathedral bell will ring for public adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Unless other duties interfere, I trust you'll come. At ten

o'clock in the evening, when you hear the house bell again, you will come to chapel for the rosary."

"Yes, Your Excellency," they said in chorus, trying hard to smile.

Alphonsus then turned to the housekeeper. "There's a small, unfurnished room in the south wing. Does anyone use it?"

"Not now. It was used by one of His Excellency's footmen. Perhaps when your footmen come . . ."

"I have no footmen. I've chosen the room for myself."

"Oh no! Please, Your Excellency!" The housekeeper was truly concerned. "It's as hot as an oven in summer and so small a man can't take ten steps in it."

"Will you move the bedding?" Alphonsus asked. "The valet will take care of the other changes."

"The bedding? You mean the bed?"

"No, the sack."

Next Alphonsus addressed the coachman. "I'm arranging to sell a good deal of furniture. When the draymen come, they'll need you to help load it into the carts."

The coachman nodded sullenly, keeping his eyes all the while on the riding crop. He was trying to muster enough courage to mention the mules. When he succeeded, the words tumbled over one another in their haste. "When will Your Excellency's horses come?"

"I brought them with me last night."

"Last night? By Our Lady, Your Excellency, I took them for mules!"

"So they are," Alphonsus said. "Very well, let's admit that the bishop's horses are mules. If you take good care of them, they'll serve me well." He looked at each of the servants again. "Is there anything more you need to know?"

There was nothing.

Alphonsus went out. His feet sank into the deep pile of the parlor carpet, as if he were crossing some spongy, moss-covered lowland. A wall tapestry showed Diana pursuing a stag. Above a

beautifully carved table hung an oil painting of a young girl, done in the manner of Rembrandt, with strong light effects on the cheeks and red-brown hair. On the table an exquisite marble satyr squatted on his haunches, his wicked, laughing head thrown back, eyes half-closed, lips parted. His hoofs were thrust forward in a posture of abandonment to sensual delight. Alphonsus picked him up and carried him away, bringing back a simple statue of the Blessed Virgin.

The next day the deep-pile Turkish rug was rolled up. The tapestry and picture were taken down. With shocked and grieving faces, the servants watched the coachman help the movers carry out carved chairs and tables, tester beds, velvet hangings. All day they worked in the heat. Finally the luxuries were gone, and the episcopal palace looked like a neat, well-appointed monastery.

During community rosary that night the cook was crying like a baby, sniffing, blowing her nose; and when she should have been meditating on the sorrows of our Lady, she was thinking about the fine house with its gold clock, its marble statues, and its fine arraswork. Now it was stripped to the bone, and nobody would be envying her any more. She was also lamenting that the new bishop would never have cause to praise her beef basted with the fine white wine that had come all the way from France and was destined to remain forever, corked and untasted, in the cellar under the kitchen floor. She distracted everyone except Alphonsus. Lost in prayer, he heard nothing.

Every morning when the six o'clock bell rang, the new bishop's valet came into the bare little room in the south wing, to help His Excellency put on his old, patched habit. For two weeks he bore the indignity with patience. When he could endure it no longer, he said, "The village tailor is waiting to measure Your Excellency. When may I let him come?"

"To measure me?" Alphonsus seemed surprised. "Would he like to weigh me as well and count my teeth?"

"Surely you are jesting! Your habit, Your Excellency — will you pardon me for the frankness — it is threadbare, it is patched. It is not the sort of thing that a bishop should appear in!"

"Of course, it would be quite out of place if any other bishop wore it." Alphonsus was fastening the cincture. "You see, my dear fellow, it's the habit of the Redemptorist Order. Although I'm Bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths, I'm also rector major of my order. To take off my habit would be unthinkable." He picked up the Redemptorist rosary.

"Then may I make a suggestion?"

"You may."

"A new habit, Your Excellency — something of fine, soft wool."

"No, no, my dear friend. I have taken a vow of poverty. Do you think God wants me to wear fine clothes when I serve the poor?" He put his hand on the valet's shoulder and added with all seriousness, "Don't worry about how I clothe my body. Worry about how I clothe my soul."

The sacristan was even more upset than the valet. Alphonsus insisted upon wearing the old vestments which bore his predecessor's coat-of-arms. Among them was a magnificent cope. With some of the money from the sale of the furniture, Alphonsus ordered dalmatics to go with it.

"But Your Excellency must order a new cope too," the sacristan insisted.

"That would be wasting money," Alphonsus said.

"But your dalmatics won't match His late Excellency's cope! Shall we have two coats-of-arms at the same time?"

"Does it matter?" Alphonsus asked.

When the new dalmatics arrived, the sacristan opened the package with fear. How noticeable would the difference be? he wondered. Would the colors at least harmonize? Carefully he unfolded the vestments and stared in dismay. They also bore the arms of the dead bishop.

XVII

ALTHOUGH THE DIOCESE OF ST. AGATHA of the Goths consisted of thirty thousand persons, Alphonsus found the churches half empty even on Sundays. Extramarital unions were common and the rate of illegitimacy was high. Yet there was no dearth of priests. Four hundred had been appointed to serve the territory, and seventy-six lived in the episcopal city itself, which had a population of only five thousand. Some of them lived at home, said Mass for their immediate families, heard no confessions and preached no sermons. Alphonsus began to understand the attitude of men like Tanucci. Since this was a diocese with good revenues, shepherds came to shear the flock. How many young men in the Kingdom of Naples, Alphonsus grimly wondered, entered the seminary each year in search of financial security; how many after ordination pushed and fought and scrambled for those places where the pastures were greenest? How many of those ultimately becoming bishops demanded of their clergy standards no higher than their own?

He knew, however, that men like Tanucci were wrong. The remedy lay not in suppressing the Church, but in reforming it. Consequently, he undertook the reform of his own diocese almost at once. A few months after his arrival indolent priests were startled by the announcement of a general mission. Into their sleepy little villages poured the finest preachers from all the missionary societies in and around Naples. It was a great nuisance, the priests thought, to house them and feed them and gather the people together. It was a still greater nuisance when Alphonsus demanded from each parish lists of lapsed Catholics and of the poor who needed material aid.

When the general mission was over more than one parish

priest breathed a sigh of relief and looked forward to the long days that lay ahead of him with little to do but eat his fat roasts and drink his wine. Then came news that at the end of six months another mission would be held and thereafter one every two years.

The clergy grumbled. Although they admitted that their churches were now filled, they had to spend longer hours in the confessional as a result. Besides, the new enthusiasm wouldn't last. They complained of the Holy Father's fatuity in elevating a missionary to the episcopacy. They would have liked to accuse the new bishop of popularizing and enriching his own order at their expense; but having foreseen that danger, Alphonsus had sent them no Redemptorists.

Then unexpectedly the diocesan seminarians returned to their village homes for an extended holiday.

"Oh, he's a fine fellow," the boys told their families. "He knows each of us by name, visits our classes and examines us himself. And now he sends us off for a gay time at home."

But the parish priests, who had persuaded the boys of their vocations, frowned. "No good can come of it!" they said.

As a result of this general holiday two boys were walking through a mountain defile on their way to Ducenta, which was their native village. Each carried his clothes tied in a bundle and slung over his back.

Gaetano, the older, was in high spirits. "Just think, an extra two weeks away from that dark, foul-smelling seminary! What luck!"

"It is a miserable hole," Carlo, the younger boy, admitted, thinking of the ill-ventilated dormitory and the dark, musty classrooms.

"I'll give my pretty little cousin a big surprise," Gaetano was saying. "She's a sly one — not married yet! I wonder if she's still heartbroken or if the dowry's too niggardly."

"I suppose you can't attract bees without honey," Carlo said, although his mind was not on the conversation. It was true, the

seminary wasn't fit to live in. Nevertheless, he hated to leave it even for a holiday. It would be good to see his father and his sisters again, but there was much that he would be missing. Furthermore, school had closed just when he was beginning to read Latin with some ease. Since the boys had been forbidden to take books with them, he was fearful of losing what progress he had made. "Did the bishop give you a stiff examination?" he asked.

Gaetano nodded. "Did he! As if I could remember stuff I hadn't looked at for two years. What good will logic do when I'm listening to how many times Old Nicolo has beaten his wife?"

"What questions did you miss?"

"Don't be silly. I was as stupid as an ass."

"And what did His Excellency say?"

"Stuff and nonsense. He wanted to know why I'd come to the seminary and what I expected to do once I had a parish of my own."

Carlo was persistent. "Then what?"

"Oh, I don't know. It doesn't matter. He's a great preacher, no doubt about that. So he can say a lot of things that sound fine, but they don't size up to much account in practice."

At Ducenta the boys passed their holiday quietly. Carlo helped his sisters with the olive harvest. The girls would beat the fruit down with their poles, while he filled the basket and carried it on his head from orchard to mill and back again, reciting his Latin verbs along the way. Gaetano spent the time teasing his pretty cousin.

"If you don't marry," he promised, "I'll make you my house-keeper one of these days."

Gaetano soon learned, however, that he would need no house-keeper. Toward the end of vacation he received a terse but kindly note from the bishop telling him that he could not return.

Those boys who did come back missed many of their former classmates and some of their teachers. Strange new faces now appeared among the faculty, and outside the classroom window a gang of laborers was digging the foundation for a new seminary.

Then one day five small brown burros waited in front of the episcopal palace in the cool of a carob tree. The bishop's sleeping sack was strapped across one of them. The others carried panniers. In the south wing of the palace Brother Romito, who had come from Pagani primarily to help Alphonsus with editing and preparing his publications, was packing a valise. Father Majone stood idly watching him. He was the third Redemptorist member of the household. Although Alphonsus had never placed much confidence in him, he was a former lawyer and an excellent preacher. He therefore seemed well qualified to deliver some of the sermons in the cathedral. There was about him, however, a smug pomposity which contrasted with the quiet, unassuming manner of the lay brother.

"I thought you were to go with us," Brother Romito said.

"I refused."

"Oh." Brother Romito did not so much as raise an eyebrow.

Father Majone leaned on the window sill and looked out. "You know yourself, Brother, that I didn't join the Redemptorists to play lackey to any bishop. I hardly consider myself under obedience in a case like this."

Brother Romito whispered a silent prayer. "Your compliance would have made the trip easier for His Excellency."

"St. Agatha of the Goths is as little to my taste as a desert island, and the villages he's going to visit are less so. Here I'm allowed to do everything but preach missions, and preaching missions happens to be my vocation."

"Perhaps then you'll be permitted to go home." Brother Romito was closing the valise.

"I wrote Father Villani months ago asking him to request my recall, but nothing's come of it. He stands by the rector major in everything."

Brother Romito stopped listening. Of late, conversations with Father Majone had been the greatest of his trials. He had no patience with the pompous, querulous ex-lawyer, who never seemed to realize how trivial his own vexations were compared to

those the bishop had to endure. Recently Alphonsus had been sitting up all night with asthma. Breathing with difficulty and plagued by such headaches that even his vision was impaired, he spent the hours between midnight and morning writing. Even a man in good health, Brother Romito thought, could not stand such exertion. Yet years before, he knew, Alphonsus had made a vow never to lose a moment of time; and by some miracle he was always cheerful and ready for work the next day. Nevertheless, Brother Romito had some misgivings about the bishop making a visitation of his diocese. Was he, perhaps, overestimating his physical endurance? It was one thing to sit at a writing desk and quite another to be jogging all day up and down the mountain-side, sleeping in strange beds and eating unaccustomed food. If only they were all back in the community house at Pagani!

Brother Romito was unaware that other members of the household were wishing the same thing. At that very moment a conversation was taking place in the dining room, where His Excellency's vicar general and a canon of the cathedral, both dressed for travel, were talking together in undertones.

"It's the worst humiliation I've had to endure," the vicar general said. He was trembling with indignation. "If he wants to ride a donkey like a peasant, let him do so. Then he should go alone."

"Unfortunately," the canon reminded him, "he happens to be the bishop."

"I know. The bit is in our mouths. Even so, must everyone play the ass just because he holds the reins?"

"Well, well," the canon said in a tone of appeasement, "We'll get used to it. It's better to ride a donkey through the diocese than down to Naples. We may have to do that one of these days."

"There's no need for a visitation anyway," the vicar general said. "We've gotten along without one for the past twenty years."

Hearing footsteps, they fell silent. Alphonsus came in, showing his usual good spirits and vitality. He still wore his patched Redemptorist habit.

"Is Brother Romito ready?" he asked.

"I'm sure I don't know." The vicar general's voice revealed his irritation.

"It's going to be a hot day, Your Excellency," the canon said with a measure of hope. "The carriage would give you protection from the sun."

Alphonsus agreed. "But we'll find some of our roads too narrow for a carriage."

"Your Excellency is not yet acquainted with the diocese," the vicar general said. "The carriage roads go through every sizable village."

"We shan't confine our visits to sizable villages," Alphonsus answered, his good spirits on the wane. "Besides, we'll need donkeys in visiting the sick."

"Visiting the sick!" Both men showed surprise. For some reason, the sick always lived in inaccessible huts, at the end of mule paths or along stony mountain trails.

"And the poor," Alphonsus added.

"Everyone in the diocese is poor," the vicar general commented. "But may I ask who the sick are?"

"We shall see." Alphonsus looked sharply at his two companions. They were simply dressed, as he had requested. Nevertheless, the fine quality of their clothing contrasted with his own. He hoped that somewhere Father Villani was praying for him, for he was about to lose his temper. For a moment he stood uncertain. Then he turned quickly, went outside and mounted the burro laden with his sleeping sack. The others had no choice but to follow. Behind them came Brother Romito with the valise.

Thus they finally set out on their journey, with the bitterness of the sun on their backs and ill-temper even more bitter in their hearts.

As they passed through the main street of the village, the vicar general burned with embarrassment. He was even more humiliated when he noted that the villagers greeted the bishop with an affectionate warmth which he considered too familiar.

Respect, not friendship, was the proper attitude toward a prelate of the Church. He also noted that they did not bother to greet either him or the canon. Only the wine merchant, who sat in front of his shop, seemed to recognize the incongruity of their appearance. He alone dared to call out, "A bishop, Your Excellency, should travel by coach."

"May God make you a saint," Alphonsus replied. "Come over here."

The wine merchant approached, looking sheepish.

"Here's a bit of God's wisdom," Alphonsus said to him, in the manner of one addressing a friend. "It comes from the Scriptures, so put it in your pocket and keep it there." Then he quoted from the matins for Monday: "Some trust in chariots, some in horses; but we call upon the name of the Lord."

"No offense was intended, Your Excellency. No offense at all." The wine merchant kept rubbing his hands together and bowing effusively. "I spoke only out of respect for the cloth. I'm an ignorant man."

"Then say a prayer," Alphonsus advised him. "No man is ignorant if he knows how to pray."

In the small valleys among the mountains, where the peasants had planted their fields of hemp and lupine and chickpeas, the sun beat unmercifully. The ground was hard and the young crops were stunted and already burned.

Once Alphonsus called to a farmer who was harrowing his field of vetch. "What's the trouble with your crops?"

"There's been no rain," the farmer answered. "Our Lady must be angry."

"They blame everything on the Blessed Virgin," the vicar general grumbled as they rode on.

"But the man is right," Alphonsus said. "Our Lady is angry, and God is going to punish us with famine."

"Punish us? For what?"

"For our sins."

"In that case," the vicar general said, "He should send a famine every year."

They passed another farm. It was laid out in terraces which climbed the side of the mountain and were supported by stone walls. The terraces exhibited a particularly poor stand of barley.

Alphonsus saw it and shook his head. "There will be great suffering throughout Europe."

"You're a pessimist," the canon said lightly. "It's likely the drouth is only local."

"Unfortunately it's not."

The vicar general and the canon exchanged meaningful glances.

"How do you know?" the vicar general asked.

"I've known for two years," Alphonsus said.

The vicar general thought it was bad enough to be making a pastoral visitation on a burro. It was worse to be traveling with a bishop whose mind was so erratic. How could Alphonsus know about the drouth two years before it occurred? Besides, he had no way of guessing even now what conditions were beyond the kingdom.

Alphonsus reached for his beads. "Let's say a rosary."

They all began to pray, and for a while the sound of their voices mingled with the thud of hoofs on the stony road. A girl passed with a jar of oil on her head. It did not occur to her or to anyone else who came that way that the little gray man on the donkey was the bishop.

Three weeks later they were staying in a poverty-stricken village where the parish priest was old, crippled with rheumatism, and too poor to serve them anything better than polenta and horse beans. On the first afternoon Alphonsus gave a catechism class to the children, to prepare them for confirmation. On the second afternoon he went into the sacristy of the church to examine the vestments.

The pastor was frightened. "I know they're almost beyond use," he explained apologetically. "But what can I do, Your Excellency? I have no money for vestments. Even if Maria Galenta — the

chandler's wife — were to make them herself, I couldn't pay for the cloth."

"Have you no surplices for acolytes?" Alphonsus asked.

"God forgive us, we have none. The boys come in clean shirts. It's the best we can do."

Alphonsus crossed the room and pulled open a drawer. He discovered some broken cruets.

"There are priests, Your Excellency," the pastor said, now thoroughly ashamed, "who can get money from the farmers whether a crop fails or doesn't. It's a gift I've never had."

"It's not a gift," Alphonsus said sharply. "Your task is to help the poor, not to bleed them."

"But what shall I do?" He was holding up one of the two chasubles he possessed. "Maria Galenta made this one over, cutting away the parts that were worn. That's why it's so small."

It was truly a sorry looking object. Alphonsus examined it carefully. "Your chandler's wife is a good seamstress. I'll call on her tomorrow." He took out a notebook and began writing.

The old pastor thought he was making an unfavorable report which would be sent to Rome. As he folded the chasuble, his hands shook. "I'll do anything you tell me," he said desperately. "It's just that I don't know what to do."

"There's nothing you can do about the vestments, Father. I'm making a list of what you need." Alphonsus showed him the notebook. "Everything will be sent to you, but it may take some time."

At this, the pastor became frantic. "But Your Excellency, I told you. I can't pay!"

"They won't cost you anything, Father. When you're in trouble like this, you must write to me. Your parishioners are also my parishioners, and God has many ways of repeating the miracle of the loaves and fishes."

"Well, well now . . ." the old man exclaimed, his dismay suddenly changing to relief. "What did you say? Did you say that I won't have to pay anything? Nothing at all? God be praised!"

What can I do for Your Excellency? Even without money, there must be something I can do."

"Yes, there is. One child, Father, couldn't come to catechism class."

"Barbara Santoro."

"That's right."

"The poor thing has a broken leg. Coming back from market she fell asleep and tumbled off the mule. Her mother didn't call the doctor for two weeks. When he came, he found she had let it get into pretty bad condition."

"Will you take me to her house tomorrow?" Alphonsus asked. "I can give her the instructions there."

"But she can't be confirmed, Your Excellency, and by the time you make another visitation, she'll have forgotten everything."

"It's a great disappointment for a child . . ."

"True, but she knows she can't come."

"How far does she live?" Alphonsus asked.

"Only two miles, but it's off the road."

"How do you get there?"

"By the sheep walk, Your Excellency."

Alphonsus considered for a moment. "If I give her the instructions, perhaps her father can carry her here for confirmation."

The pastor shook his head. "He's dead."

"Has she no brothers?"

"Only a little fellow seven years old."

"Very well," Alphonsus decided. "Brother Romito will fetch her here. And by the way, will you give me a list of any persons in the parish who are causing scandal? We must call on them too."

Alphonsus and his companions tarried three days longer. They scaled the hills and descended into the valleys, visiting lapsed Catholics, the sick and the poor. Every night when they returned Alphonsus ate his polenta and horse beans and went directly to the church to pray. Thirty minutes later the bell was rung, and the people gathered to hear him preach.

The last night he was sitting alone in the dilapidated bedroom

of the rectory, his head buried in his arms. He was exhausted. The headache which had wracked him day after day seemed worse than ever. Perhaps once they had resumed their journey, he would get rid of it. He heard a knock on the door, and the vicar general came in. He had the strange, immobile expression which some men assume when they are faced with a necessary but exceedingly difficult task.

"Your Excellency is very tired," he said, "but please — I will be brief."

"What is it, Father? I'm afraid I've worn you out as well as myself."

"I'm glad to be worn out," the vicar general said, sitting down and staring at the floor. "It's a rather new experience."

Through the open window of the hot little room came the song of a nightingale. The two men listened to it in silence for some time. Then Alphonsus said, "Father, what is it you came to say?"

The vicar general thrust his hands between his knees and continued to stare at the floor. He spoke softly, hesitantly, like a man trying to remember something or perhaps piecing together fragments of thought as they flitted through his mind. "It's a strange thing," he said, "how a man can go year after year — at ease in his conscience, esteeming himself and esteemed by the world. Then one day he gets to know someone — perhaps someone he doesn't even care for, someone he criticizes, almost despises — and all at once the scales drop from his eyes. Looking into the other man's soul, he also sees himself for the first time — a stranger, yet as he really is, as God must see him. It's a matter of contrast, I suppose. When I was a child I thought my grandfather was the biggest man in the world. Then one night he brought a friend home — a burly, six-footer — and for the first time I saw that, although my own head failed to reach to my grandfather's shoulder, my grandfather's head scarcely reached the shoulder of his friend. It was a great shock. For a while I lost something of my pride in him." He stopped, suddenly embarrassed by the realization that the bishop was one of the smallest men he had

ever known. "Later, of course, I learned that size is not the measure of a man. Your Excellency, have you ever examined an ear of wheat which has been attacked by what the farmers call stinking smut? So deformed that . . ." He stopped and gave Alphonsus a long look. It was filled with misery. He felt like a bad child who doesn't deserve even a donkey.

"What is it that's troubling you?" Alphonsus asked, for he could make nothing of what the vicar general was saying.

"Your Excellency, may I go to confession?"

"God bless you, Father. Of course, you may."

The balance of the conversation took place with the vicar general on his knees.

After Mass the next morning, the bishop and his companions ate one more meal of polenta and horse beans. Then they mounted their donkeys and set out for the next parish. The old pastor, his shoulders twisted with rheumatism and fatigue, watched them until they had disappeared. "In my old age, God has sent me a friend," he said to himself. He thought of Tobias, who had unwittingly entertained an angel. What a bedraggled angel the little man on the donkey was, in his threadbare habit and dusty worn-out shoes. The pastor smiled and went inside. He looked around the ill-furnished rectory, and for the first time in many years a wave of youthful enthusiasm swept over him. To the depth of his being, he felt — as he had felt after his ordination — a great gratitude that God had made him a priest, and particularly a priest among the poor. Then he thought about the new vestments and smiled again.

XVIII

BY THE TIME Alphonsus and his companions returned to St. Agatha, the vintage was in. Everyone said it was the worst grape harvest in twenty years. Furthermore, the vineyards had been attacked by green flies, so that the leaves swelled with galls and then shriveled on the vines. Since the growers knew that the roots were also infested, landowners were talking about destroying their vines and planting fresh stock; but the peasants, who had lost everything that season, were concerned only with the problem of how to feed their families during the winter months. It was said that a handful of speculators were buying up all the grain and supplies that could be had on the market and were going to hold them for profit.

Alphonsus made immediate preparations to purchase whatever he could. He set Brother Romito to the task of filling the episcopal storerooms with peas, beans, turnips, and every kind of vegetable he could lay hands on, regardless of price. Father Majone grumbled about his extravagance, the ingratitude of the people, and the necessity of looking out for oneself. At first Alphonsus paid no attention to him. Then hoping to silence the endless litany, he put him in charge of the bookkeeping.

As soon as the people of St. Agatha saw what was happening, they were more worried than Father Majone.

"Every Sunday we shell out the centesimi," they said, "and what good does it do? The bishop uses our money to fill his own store-rooms and we're left to starve."

They would go to market each week to haggle over the cost of lentils and garlic and beans. Yet more often than not, they came home empty-handed because the prices were so high they couldn't buy enough to feed a canary, or so they said. When Christmas

was approaching, the markets closed. There was no produce left to sell. Every morning a queue of hungry people stood outside the baker's, but many of them too were turned away. A rumor spread that in the mountains the herdsmen were eating grass. Then at Caserta the villagers broke into a warehouse and made off with everything they found.

At this point Alphonsus, who had run out of money, went to Naples hoping to borrow some. The appalling condition of the poor, which was evident everywhere, determined him to act without delay. On the Sunday following his return, he announced from the pulpit that whatever he had stored was for the people in his diocese. The parishioners were so astounded that the women broke into tears; and the men, forgetting they were in church, began to talk excitedly to one another, so that their bishop could hardly make himself heard over the hubbub. He explained that he would charge them nothing, that the food would be rationed, and that they must take only what they needed. Finally, he asked that in return they pray for all the people of Europe, because the drouth extended over most of the continent.

On Monday morning the door of the episcopal palace was flung open, and the people crowded inside. By that night five hundred had received food. Day after day they returned. The episcopal stores dwindled. The cook and the housekeeper were in a huddle. What would the bishop do when everything was gone? they wondered.

Father Majone came to Alphonsus in high dudgeon. He found the bishop bent over his desk writing. A pile of manuscript lay on the table by the door and on top of it was a letter from Joseph Remondini, the publisher.

"Yesterday Pepe's family made off with a double ration of food!" Father Majone blurted out.

Alphonsus looked up from his work. "Never mind. They won't overeat."

"Pepe came in the morning; he sent his son in the afternoon. No one realized what had happened until it was too late."

"Don't worry about it."

"I have to worry about it." Majone glared at the bishop accusingly. "The people are making a fool of you. They don't scruple to rob even their bishop. And behind your back they laugh at your simplicity."

"That's very possible," Alphonsus said. "Does it matter? It's better to be cheated into giving too much than to lose one's soul by giving too little."

At that moment Father Majone's glance inadvertently strayed to the letter on the manuscript. His eye caught the phrase: "You have written before that you will accept no profits . . ." The sentence was more than he could bear. He picked up the letter and shook it in the air. "You throw away the food just as you throw away the income on your books!"

Alphonsus stood up, his face red with anger. "Are you reading my mail?"

"Yes, I am. I'm reading your mail, Your Excellency, because you leave it out where anyone can read it. It's one thing to be generous. It's quite another to play the fool!"

He was still holding the letter when Alphonsus took an involuntary step forward, then stopped. "Put that table between us!" he cried. "You're making my blood boil!"

Father Majone threw down the letter, turned on his heel, and left.

The next day Alphonsus sold his carriage and the team of mules.

"Your Excellency is depriving me of my livelihood," the coachman exclaimed, wringing his hands in despair.

"But I'm not selling you," Alphonsus told him. "I still need your services."

Then he went through each room of the house, hunting for anything which might be turned into money for food.

After that Brother Romito made a trip to Naples, because there the boats from Sicily still brought cargoes of lupine seeds, which were edible enough if steeped in water until the bitterness was taken out of them.

A day came, however, when there was nothing more to sell, and people had to be turned away. Some died of starvation; many of those who didn't caught the plague.

Every day Alphonsus rode his donkey into the country, carrying the Blessed Sacrament with him. He would come back at night-fall with no heart to eat his own supper of soup and dried figs. Once when the cook was urging him to eat, he cried, "Take it away!" and covered his face with his hands. He was haunted by the memory of a woman whose baby had died because she had no milk in her breasts to feed it. The morning that Alphonsus saw her, she had given the other children some chestnuts and had gone to bed, pretending illness so they would not expect her to eat with them. A week later she too died. Now the father took his orphans every day to paw through the tavernkeeper's pile of refuse.

With the coming of spring conditions improved. The surviving ewes lambed and, turned into the fields of winter vetch, grew plump and gave their milk. The sows, which had rooted for themselves all winter, now farrowed. The fall onions were ready to be pulled. But by that time, in the Kingdom of Naples alone, 300,000 persons had died of starvation.

By that time also, in the Diocese of St. Agatha of the Goths, nearly everyone had become acquainted with Alphonsus. When a man was in trouble, his friends would say, "Go to the bishop. His Excellency will tell you what to do." If a girl was thrown out of the house by her parents, she could always knock on the door of the episcopal palace, for the bishop was a friend of sinners as well as saints. More than one criminal found sanctuary in the cathedral; and when no sanctuary was allowed to three army deserters, for whom the penalty was death, Alphonsus himself wangled a pardon from the king.

Yet to Alphonsus, it seemed that his administration of the diocese had been a failure. Had he ever been tempted to think otherwise, Father Majone would have prevented him. He made acerb com-

ments about the bundles of manuscript which the bishop sent off to the publisher with amazing regularity. "Monk's work" he called them, and "not fit for a prelate." From time to time he reminded Alphonsus that as soon as one scandal in the diocese was corrected, another appeared. He remarked that lapsed Catholics who had received food during the famine still did not return to the faith. "As if we fed them for that purpose," Alphonsus replied. And when Father Majone discovered that some negligent priests, promising amendment, had grown remiss, the bishop said, "Passion may lead a weak priest to live scandalously. But I wonder, Father, if our Lord may not prefer him to the malicious backbiter, the chronic grumbler."

Father Majone's face reddened. "I suppose you're referring to me."

"I am."

"Well, it's not my fault, Your Excellency. This is not a vocation for me, and I don't intend to make one of it. You'd have done better to let me return to Pagani three years ago when I asked."

Alphonsus looked at the pompous, recalcitrant priest with a distaste that filled him with shame. "Very well, Father. I am ready to correct that error now."

Father Majone's face lighted. "Are you serious?"

"Quite. In my garden a rebellious, disobedient Redemptorist is worse than a nettle. Go back to Pagani and pray God for the grace of humility."

The next morning Father Majone, happy and uncontrite, appeared with his valise, to ask for the bishop's blessing. He received it and left.

Alphonsus went to his room singularly despondent. What a waste his life had been during the past three years. He felt he had accomplished nothing in the diocese, and at the same time he had gradually lost touch with the order which he had founded. Wherever there was a Redemptorist house, problems needed solution. Yet all he ever saw were words upon paper — confusing, pla-

cating, misleading words. How often a visit to the house in trouble and one talk with the priest would have solved everything. Instead he had been driven like a nail into the walls of St. Agatha, and no one but the Holy Father himself could withdraw the nail. The Holy Father . . . the idea caught him at once, and he called for Brother Romito. Rapidly he began dictating a petition to the pope, asking permission to resign. He was in poor health, of advanced age, he explained, and therefore unable to keep in close personal touch with the thirty thousand persons in his diocese. He begged the Holy Father to have pity on him, and when he finished the letter his conscience was at peace.

"Pray, Brother Romito," he said. "Perhaps we may yet follow Father Majone home."

Pope Clement, however, refused the petition. "Your shadow alone," he wrote in his reply, "is enough to govern the diocese."

So Alphonsus remained and every year the burden grew heavier. Finally one day, when torrential rains had sent landslides across mountain roads and drowned the chickens on many a farm, he returned from a trip to the country and went immediately to his room. Brother Romito, coming in with the mail, found him on his sleeping sack with all the available blankets piled over him.

"What is the matter with Your Excellency?" he asked.

"The body's wearing out, Brother," Alphonsus replied, as if he had not come in wet to the skin. "It's about time," he added, remembering that in a few weeks he would celebrate his seventy-second birthday. Although he shivered under the blankets, his face was flushed with fever.

Brother Romito moved him to the tester bed in the big room, and after the angelus, brought him a bowl of soup. He seemed better then.

"I'll be all right in the morning," he said.

But the next morning he was unable to say Mass. His wrists were swollen and so sore that he could not endure even the touch of the sheets against them.

"It looks like an acute attack of rheumatism," the doctor said

that afternoon. "A man of his age can't stand overwork and exposure. Keep him quiet. Nothing will help but rest."

So Alphonsus rested, day after day, week after week. Indeed, there was no temptation for him to do otherwise, for the inflammation which had appeared first in his wrists later spread to all his other joints and the least movement caused him pain.

Every morning the vicar general brought him the Blessed Sacrament. After that he would lie quite still, making acts of reparation, meditating on the Passion of the Lord, and praying for the people in his diocese. He offered to God not only his suffering, but also his uselessness — the hands that were too swollen and stiff and sore for any work, the feet that could no longer sustain his body, the head whose throbbing pain made reading impossible. He became sensitive to the passage of time merely by listening to sounds that came through the open window. The early rattle of carts reminded him that it was market day in the village of St. Agatha, the honking of geese heralded the end of summer, and the soft drizzle of rain brought news that winter had set in.

Then gradually, in spite of the doctor's orders that he rest, he grew into the habit of receiving petitioners in his room and handling details of work from his bed. He called for his half-finished manuscripts, read them over, planned revisions, outlined new treatises and finished old ones. He had let no year pass at St. Agatha without sending some manuscripts to the printer. Again and again he had published attacks on French atheism, which was becoming fashionable among the young intellectuals in Naples. He had produced a dozen pamphlets of instruction to priests, having learned through the visitations of his own diocese how badly they were needed. And whenever his meditations took form and substance, he jotted them down for the guidance of others. Now after months of enforced silence, he resumed that work. Hour after hour, propped up with pillows and bolsters, he dictated to Brother Romito.

Then one morning all the pillows in the episcopal palace were of no avail. Alphonsus lay quite rigid, his chin bent toward his

chest. During the night he had suffered a stroke of paralysis. Although his spine and limbs were affected, his mind remained clear, and he still had the power of speech.

"This is our Lord's way of relieving my pain," he said jokingly to those who attended him. "Before, every movement hurt. Now so little movement is possible that I am quite free of pain."

At Mass the people of St. Agatha prayed for the recovery of their bishop. Priests and seminarians prayed as well. The cook, the coachman, and the housekeeper wept over their beads at community rosary. Alphonsus himself did not pray for recovery, but for the chance to be of service again, in any way that God might wish. By spring it seemed as if his prayer was to be granted. First, he found that with help he could get out of bed. Then, provided with crutches and supported by two attendants, he could walk back and forth across his room. A month later he was carried downstairs and put into a carriage for a short ride.

The air was clear, the fruit trees were in blossom, and the sparrows chattered noisily. Alphonsus breathed deeply of the fresh air, but he could see little of the beautiful world around him. Although he had regained the use of his arms and, at least partially, that of his legs, the paralysis in his neck had not changed. His head was bent so far forward that spring to him was only a green carpet under his feet.

"It is to punish me for the concupiscence of my eyes," he said. "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Once when Brother Romito and the coachman were taking him to the carriage, some boys playing in the street looked up and cried with terror, for seen from behind, his body appeared to be headless. He thought with amusement that he must resemble one of the damned from Dante's *Inferno* — perhaps the hypocrites condemned to walk eternally bent over by the weight of leaden garments, or the false soothsayers, whose heads were twisted to the rear, so that they felt perpetually the pain of having their necks wrung. But far greater than any physical pain, was the misery he felt in being unable to say Mass. Because of the position of his head, he could

take liquids only through a straw. When he was left alone in his room he would try over and over to find some position which would enable him to drink from a cup without spilling the water in it. Although he endured the agony of such efforts in silence, they left him exhausted, his body covered with perspiration. Once he could not even get back to his bed. Brother Romito, finding him slumped in his chair, called for one of the canons and together they put him back in bed. As they did so his dressing gown became unfastened.

"Holy Mother!" Brother Romito cried. "What have you done to yourself?"

The canon also gasped, for on Alphonsus' chest, where the gown had parted, was a large, open sore.

Alphonsus managed a smile. "Are you looking at that?" he asked. "It's been there a long time. The valet knows, but he promised to keep the secret. Now I suppose you'll be making a big to-do over nothing."

Brother Romito knew at once what had happened. The paralysis was pressing Alphonsus' chin into his chest and causing constant irritation.

"It's good for me," Alphonsus said to allay their concern. "It's a reminder of the Passion. Now let's forget about it, Brother, because I have good news. If I sit down and take plenty of time, I can at last drink from a cup." His face was alive with hope. "Will you write to Rome this very afternoon and ask if I may sit in a chair to receive the Precious Blood? If so, I can say Mass again."

The permission was granted, and Alphonsus once more stood before the altar, with two seminarians supporting him under the armpits. Only those who witnessed the painful process knew what the effort cost him. Their protests, however, did no good. "There's no life in me without the Mass," he insisted. "The suffering it costs is nothing compared to being deprived of it."

During the next three years Alphonsus' condition did not improve. The sore on his chest repeatedly became infected; and al-

though the infections were cured, the cause of them could not be removed. In 1772 he was still unable to walk alone beyond the few paces between his bed and his chair.

"I'm of no further use to the diocese," he complained to Brother Romito one afternoon. "Maybe the Holy Father will let me resign at last."

So Brother Romito again wrote to Rome, but Clement only replied, "It is enough for me that he govern his diocese from his bed. His prayers will do as much for his flock as all the activity in the world."

XIX

RESIGNED TO A LIFE OF PHYSICAL INACTIVITY, Alphonsus delegated his active work to others. Two canons made the biennial visitation of his diocese, the vicar general preached the Sunday sermons, and Brother Romito handled routine correspondence. The bishop would remain in his room all day, with a bell within reach. Much of the time he spent dictating, either in bed or stretched upon a sofa, his chin jutting into the sore on his chest. Nothing seemed to impair the acuteness of his mind. If he could no longer visit the country parishes, he could at least write for them. Consequently, he prepared a volume of sermons for all the Sundays of the year; he wrote brochures explaining the ceremonies of the Mass, monographs urging frequent Communion for the laity, and a new series of meditations. Then too some correspondence he insisted upon handling himself. In addition to the problems of his diocese, difficulties continually cropped up in the different Redemptorist houses. At the moment trouble threatened in Sicily, where some of the mission priests were occupying a house provided by the Bishop of Girgenti, thus appearing to have made a new foundation contrary to the royal decree. In Naples, Baron Nicholas Sarnelli was suing the order to regain possession of the Ciorani property which his dead brother had deeded to the Redemptorists.

Finally, there was always Father de Paula, scratching up the dust of the Papal States like a fighting cock. Only a few years before he had been just another Redemptorist priest, keeping the rule, going out on missions, making trouble for no one. Then by chance, when preaching across the border of the Papal States, he learned of a wealthy gentleman near the village of Scifelli who wanted to provide spiritual help for the people of that neglected district.

Father de Paula began holding interviews with the benefactor himself, with the bishop of the diocese, with the superiors of his own congregation. In a surprisingly short time, the community had a new foundation at Scifelli, outside the Kingdom of Naples, with Father de Paula installed as superior.

Unfortunately he was not content to have once tested his strength. His new enthusiasm led him into continual trouble. He could not abide by regulations. From Alphonsus he begged money for food and then spent it on books. In defiance of the rule he kept his priests on the road straight through the malarial season. Just now he was determined to move the Scifelli community to Rome.

"What will I ever do with de Paula?" Alphonsus said to Brother Romito. "In every letter I scold him, and it does no good."

"Do nothing today," Brother Romito said, seeing that the bishop was tired. "It's time to say your office." He reached for the breviary and opened it to the Vigil for the Feast of St. Matthew. It was September 20, 1774.

The following morning Alphonsus seemed more exhausted than usual after Mass. When the seminarians carried him upstairs, he asked to be put in his armchair. There they left him with an unfinished manuscript in his lap. About ten o'clock Brother Romito came in with some letters, but seeing Alphonsus motionless and unaware of his presence, he left. At noon he returned with lunch. When the bishop still failed to respond, he took the tray back to the kitchen.

"Isn't he eating?" the cook asked.

"No."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I interrupted his prayers."

The cook wiped her hands on her apron. "Is there any time you could go into his room without interrupting his prayers?" she asked.

"Never mind. He'll ring when he wants something."

By midafternoon Brother Romito was restlessly wandering through the house. He hesitated to force himself upon the bishop.

At the same time he was troubled. Of course, he decided, Alphonsus was spending the day in prayer. Perhaps he was weary of dictating or of just seeing his secretary, the vicar general and the canons. That would not be surprising. At four o'clock Brother Romito went to the cathedral for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. At six he rang the house bell for the angelus. At seven he took a dinner tray to the bishop's room, opened the door and stood stock still. Alphonsus was still in his armchair, to all appearances wide awake but motionless. His position had not changed since morning; his left hand lay palm upward on the manuscript, his right was held against his heart.

"I've brought Your Excellency some dinner," Brother Romito said, and his voice rang hollow in the silent room.

The bishop remained like a statue struck from stone.

Brother Romito fled in panic. In the hall he bumped into the vicar general.

"What has happened?" the vicar general asked.

"God have mercy on us! I don't know. That's why I'm frightened. He must have had another stroke."

Together they went to the bishop's room. For some time they stood in the doorway, looking at the figure in the armchair.

"May I speak with Your Excellency?" the vicar general asked. Receiving no reply, he went over to the chair and took Alphonsus' hand. The flesh was warm, the pulse steady. The immobile face was cool to the touch, and its color seemed normal. After closing the shutters to keep out the night air, he rejoined Brother Romito.

"There's nothing the matter with him," he said.

"Nothing the matter with him!" Brother Romito cried. "He's been like that all day."

"Go down to dinner, Brother, and forget about him until morning."

Brother Romito burst into tears. "He'll die before then. He'll die if we don't get the doctor."

"No, he won't die," the vicar general said quietly. "Is it possible, Brother, that you've never seen a man in ecstasy before?"

By that time everyone in the house knew that something strange was going on in the bishop's room. When they had occasion to pass the door, they did so quietly, as if their footsteps might cause disturbance. They gathered in chapel for the rosary, looking solemn and ill at ease. Afterward there were a few hushed words, an exchange of glances; then they scattered, and everyone went to bed.

Twice during the night Brother Romito, waking with a start, sat bolt upright in his bed. He was filled with a desire to go to the bishop's room, yet at the same time some powerful dread withheld him.

Before daybreak the household was astir, but no one dared approach the room.

"There's nothing to worry about," the vicar general said. "Let all the work go on as usual. His Excellency will ring when he wants us."

At seven o'clock the tinkle of a bell caught Brother Romito's ear. "He's ringing! He's ringing!" he called to no one in particular.

At once the whole household was put into confusion. The vicar general hurried up the staircase with Brother Romito tripping over his heels. Behind them came the canons, the cook, the housekeeper, the valet, the sacristan, and the coachman. When the door was opened Alphonsus saw a crowd of anxious, frightened faces.

"Good morning. What's going on out there?" he asked. "I only rang for Brother Romito."

"It's because you haven't rung," Brother Romito said.

Although Alphonsus was still sitting in his armchair, the manuscript had fallen to the floor. He held his rosary with his fingers on the second decade. "But I did ring. You must have heard or you wouldn't be here."

"You frightened us so!"

"Have you all gone mad?" Alphonsus asked. "Why should my ringing frighten anyone?"

An embarrassed silence fell over the group of inquiring faces. Then the vicar general tried to explain. "Perhaps you don't realize

what's happened. You've been sitting motionless in that chair, Your Excellency, for twenty-four hours."

"Have you nothing more to think about than what chair I occupy and how many times I move in it?" Alphonsus asked. Then the impatience disappeared and an expression of sadness came into his face. "I've been with the Holy Father. He's just died. Now if you'll help me, I'd like to say a requiem Mass."

At this, the nine anxious faces turned white.

"Get back to your work," the vicar general said sharply to the servants, and he sent one of the canons to fetch the seminarians who customarily helped Alphonsus on the altar.

"Poor old man!" the cook said, crying in the kitchen. "It's no wonder he's gone out of his mind, kept in that room year after year, with nothing but his books and his prayers."

"What can you expect?" the housekeeper asked. "He's seventy-nine. The mind often snaps before the body does."

"You should have seen my father," the coachman put in, "in the eighties and his mind as sharp as a honed knife."

"Which is sharper than yours ever was," the cook retorted. She had begun to peel onions so that she could cry without embarrassment.

As soon as the vicar general heard what was being said in the kitchen, he sent Brother Romito to explain that there was nothing wrong with the bishop's mind. The servants listened politely, believing not a jot of what he said.

"Haven't you ever had a dream so vivid that you thought it was true?" Brother Romito asked. "His Excellency had a dream about the Holy Father. That's all it amounts to."

Three days later word reached St. Agatha of the Goths that Pope Clement had died at seven o'clock on the morning of September 22.

The following April Brother Romito sat at a small table beside the bishop's bed, a sheet of paper before him, a quill pen in his hand. Alphonsus was dictating his formal resignation to Pope Pius

VI. He spoke slowly because every effort was painful and also because he was determined to make this request his final one:

. . . I was made Bishop of St. Agatha of the Goths in the Kingdom of Naples at the advanced age of sixty-six. I have continued with God's help to carry the episcopate for thirteen years. But now I feel myself unable to carry it any longer.

He stopped, closed his eyes and silently prayed for wisdom to move the Holy Father's heart. Then he continued:

I am in extreme old age, for in the month of September I enter on my eightieth year. Besides old age, I have many infirmities which warn me that death is near.

Again he paused. "I wonder if that will be enough."

Brother Romito put down his pen. "I doubt it, Your Excellency. This time you should go into detail."

The suggestion was distasteful to Alphonsus, who had always minimized his physical weaknesses. "The Holy Father has no time to read a medical report."

"Then someone can read it for him."

Alphonsus sighed. From his bed he could see the branches of a medlar tree, its leaves utterly still in the windless air. A longing came over him for just such stillness — not the kind which results from paralysis, where the mind is wracked by all that needs to be done and the body is powerless to accomplish it; rather the stillness of complete physical inactivity together with an equally complete intellectual and spiritual peace. Then it occurred to him that what he was really longing for was not living inertia, but death. "How long?" he asked himself, like a stranger in some foreign country, desolate and sick for home. Aloud he said, "Very well, I shall tell him everything."

I suffer from a weakness of the chest which several times has reduced me to the last extremity, and from palpitation of the heart which has also several times nearly put an end to my life. At present I am suffering from such constant headaches that sometimes they make me like one deprived of the use of his faculties. . . . During the time of my episcopate I have four times received viaticum and twice extreme unction. . . . My hearing

fails. . . . I am paralyzed to such an extent that I can no longer write a line. With difficulty I sign my name so badly that it is scarcely understood. I am become so crippled that I can no longer walk a step, and I have need of two assistants to move at all. . . .

"Will you read back what I've dictated?" Alphonsus asked.

Brother Romito read the petition.

"Are there any instances of exaggeration?"

"No, Your Excellency."

"Very well then. The Holy Father can at least see that there isn't much of me functioning any more." Alphonsus was still thinking of the medlar tree. "If I had a tree in my garden with all the branches dead and just one small live sprig coming up from the bole, I'd cut the tree down and plant a new one. Let's hope the Holy Father will do the same."

On July 17, 1775, the resignation was officially accepted, and that same month Father Villani came to St. Agatha to take Alphonsus home.

The village of Pagani was sunk in the heat of a midsummer siesta. Here and there beggars and dogs had crawled into the scant shade of buildings and fallen asleep. Pigeons stalked lazily around the fountain. A few stray chickens scratched in the gutters. Suddenly the bell of the monastery church broke the stillness. Then the parish bells also rang out—loud and clear and imperative. Finally the town crier appeared with a hand bell. Running up and down the street, he cried at the top of his voice, "The bishop is coming! The bishop is coming!" Chickens scrambled out of his way. The pigeons made a passing flurry of wings. Dogs and beggars wakened, doors opened and people crowded into the streets. The men had put on their Sunday shirts and bright-colored sashes, and the women wore black scarves over their heads in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion. Tousled-headed children wandered into the street and were pulled back again by impatient mothers. There was much shouting and chattering and gesticulating.

At the first rattle of wheels on cobblestones the people fell silent. Only when the bishop's carriage appeared, a long, astonished exclamation rose from the crowd. What a bedraggled team of horses! What a carriage! It was nothing like those which Neapolitan prelates were accustomed to travel in, with gilt trimmings, glass windows, and an official coat-of-arms on the door panels. This was a dusty, miserable affair. The mudguards were battered, the springs sagged; and instead of a liveried footman perched behind, there was attached to the carriage a towrope, and to the towrope a two-wheeled basket which contained all of the bishop's worldly goods: a wooden cross, a candlestick, and a copper lamp. Some paces behind this object came Brother Romito, riding a donkey with a sleeping sack tied across its withers.

The people were so taken aback by this strange procession that they forgot to notice the occupants of the carriage until someone cried out, "The bishop! Where's the bishop?" At once everyone began running to overtake the carriage, and Alphonsus found himself surrounded by curious, peering faces. He smiled and waved a few times. Then he wearily leaned back, and the people could see him no longer. The carriage rattled down the street and stopped at the Redemptorist monastery.

Two brothers came out, and to the amazement of the crowd, they lifted out of the carriage what could only be described as the ruin of a man—a small, fleshless heap of bones and dark skin, wearing a patched, dilapidated Redemptorist habit. The brothers held their burden long enough for the crowd to kneel and receive a blessing. Then they carried it into the house. The bishop had come home. The simple villagers, however, who could judge only by superficialities, were visibly disappointed.

XX

THAT NIGHT Alphonsus was carried into the refectory, and once again he sat at the bare monastic table, with an earthenware plate and mug before him. The lector was reading from the third book of the *Imitation of Christ*:

Do not say: "I cannot endure these things from such a man, and things of this kind are not to be suffered by me; for he has done me great wrong and reproaches me with things I never thought of." . . . He is not truly patient who is willing to suffer only so much as he thinks good, and from whom he pleases.

Alphonsus was too deaf to hear the words. Around him were the old, friendly faces of the past and the young, new faces of the future. Alphonsus was too paralyzed to see them. Yet he did not need either to hear or to see. The little world within the orbit of his vision — the plate and the mug — were enough. They told him that he was home again.

He thanked God for allowing him to spend in the community his last days. There could not be many left — six months, a year, two years at most. He prayed that he might live long enough to see the end of persecution against his order and removal of the disabilities which Charles had imposed upon it. Then he whispered, "*Mea culpa*," ashamed to have asked so much of God. He thought of the crucifix he had drawn as a child, when his father had scolded him, and how he had put on it his own child's body. At that time, of course, he had not known that suffering must become the object of desire. He thought also of the death of Christ, Whose life had been shorter than his own by almost half a century; and he contrasted the orphaned community of twelve apostles with the more than one hundred professed Redemptorists. "*Mea culpa*," he said again, convinced that he had sinned in presumption and pride.

The lector was reading:

O Lord, make that possible to me by grace which seems impossible to me by nature . . . let all exercises of tribulation become lovely and desirable to me, for Thy Name's sake; for to suffer and be afflicted for Thee is very wholesome for my soul.

Then dinner was over and Alphonsus was carried into the recreation room.

For a little while he had the joy of meeting everyone. After that Father Villani asked him to speak to the community. So he told them how, during his thirteen years in the episcopate, he had prayed for them, rejoiced with them and suffered with them. He also spoke of their present trials: the insecurity they were under, having never received royal approbation of the rule, the danger of suppression at the king's pleasure, the lawsuit against them which was still pending in Naples. "Yet these are not evils," he said, "but blessings . . .

Persecutions are to the works of God what the frosts of winter are to plants; far from destroying them, they help them to strike their roots deep in the soil and make them more full of life. What really injure the religious orders, and bring the plant to decay like a worm gnawing at the root, are voluntary sins and shortcomings. It is these imperfections we must put an end to. A single breach of the rule causes me more pain than all the persecutions to which we are subject. . . .

He suddenly broke off and said laughing, "What a dour old man I've become. This is no talk for recreation. Let's have some music. I haven't touched a keyboard for thirteen years."

So they helped him to the piano, and his fingers wandered over the keys, trying to pick up the melody of the *Duetto*, which he had composed himself when he was a young man. He could not remember it.

"We have the music," Father Villani said.

Someone came and slipped the sheets into the music rack, but Alphonsus could not lift his head high enough to see them. So he played the *Salve Regina* instead, and they all sang together. It

seemed to Alphonsus that Father Majone's voice was the loudest and the most assured. "A single breach of the rule causes me more pain. . . ." Perhaps Father Majone had broken no rules since his departure from St. Agatha.

By the end of the first week at Pagani, Alphonsus' life had slipped into a routine. He was present at all the community devotions, he visited the Blessed Sacrament every day, he made the Stations of the Cross where they had been placed in the long corridor into which his room opened, and he received many visitors. He also continued his writing and correspondence.

"He must take a carriage ride every day," the doctor said.

"Nonsense," Alphonsus declared. "Such useless expense!"

"It's no expense at all," Brother Romito answered. "You already have the carriage and horses." He was hoping that the old trap would hold together a little longer and that the beasts would not drop in their shafts.

"Whoever heard of a religious driving out in a carriage?" Alphonsus asked. But his companions only pooh-poohed his objections, and without forewarning, they picked him up in their arms and transported him to where the carriage was waiting in the drive.

Father Villani pushed a cushion behind his back, gaily reciting the verse from St. John as he did so: "When thou wast young, thou didst gird thyself and walk where thou wouldst; but when thou hast become old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another will gird thee and lead thee whither thou wouldst not."

The months passed quickly. The autumn asters blossomed in the monastery garden, and Alphonsus noticed for the first time that his sight was failing. To him the flowers were only blurs of bright color. "Glory be to God," he thought, "for the eyes are a temptation to sin." Then the asters died, and with the coming of advent winter rains whipped against the roof. When the sun came out, shrouded in white mist, Alphonsus would be hustled into the carriage for his daily ride.

"The old nags are holding out all right," Brother Romito commented one day as he tucked a blanket under Alphonsus' knees. "But don't stay out too long; the dampness will get into your knees."

Alphonsus scarcely heard him. His mind was on a letter he had just received from the Bishop of Veroli. Father de Paula was establishing a third house in the Papal States in the village of Frosinone, and His Excellency had written: "The people of my diocese think very highly of Father de Paula, whose preaching has edified them for many years. We would consider it a great favor if you could see fit to name him rector of the new foundation." An unfortunate request, Alphonsus was thinking. He had met with enough trouble from de Paula in the past. Nevertheless, he would like to please the bishop. Besides, the appointment would open the way for a new rector at Scifelli. When he came in from his ride, he decided, he would write the bishop at once, granting his request. He would also send de Paula a forthright, admonitory letter. Perhaps it would have some effect. He leaned against the cushions and quietly fell asleep. The next thing he knew the driver had brought him back to the monastery door.

The letter of admonition, however, failed to accomplish its purpose. The house at Frosinone was scarcely established when de Paula began introducing innovations without so much as consulting his superior. Often Alphonsus learned of them by chance when some priest from the Papal States came to Pagani. Then he would write in anger and to no avail.

"He thinks I'm a dotard who doesn't know what's happening," he complained to Brother Romito. "I can't go to Frosinone myself, but I can make my ill-temper reach to the ends of the earth."

Then he began dictating:

Your reverence ends your letter by saying: "Let me act." I have never prevented you from acting, but I never intended that you should arrange the affairs of the congregation without consulting me. By the grace of God, I am not dead yet, nor have I lost my senses. . . . I have been an advocate, I have been a bishop, and I have had to deal with such matters many times.

Why then, when I am rector major, am I not consulted? . . . As bishop and advocate I have advised in a thousand matters, but now, in your opinion, I am incapable of anything. . . . May God ever be blessed who wishes me to be so mortified. . . . There is perhaps no house which has given me greater pain than the house of Frosinone.

"I wish it had never been established!" he cried, when he had concluded the letter. "That man is worse than a mortification. There are times when I wonder — God forgive me — if in a crisis he would remain faithful to us. If he rebelled, he could carry the Papal States with him and rip us in two."

"Father, Father, what are you saying!" Brother Romito was horrified. "Nothing like that could happen. He's young. Life will temper him."

"The only thing that will ever temper de Paula," Alphonsus retorted, "is being made rector major himself. God save us from that day, for he'd tear the rule to pieces. In Christ I love him, but his waywardness is impelled by something deep and obscure — perhaps by the unholy alliance of ambition and pride. Pray for him, Brother, as you have prayed for me in the past, for we are both sinners."

So Brother Romito prayed, and for a while there was peace.

Two years, three years passed. Looking forward to his death, Alphonsus prepared and published a *Dissertation on Things Pertaining to Eternal Joy*. Yet still he did not die.

Then one day he sat in an armchair reading — or, more accurately, trying to read. Although he held the book close to his face, the letters blurred. For ten minutes he had been wrestling with the same paragraph, slightly shifting his position from time to time in the hope that a change in light would render the page legible. His head throbbed. His arms ached from the weight of the book. At last he put it down. The effort was useless. Reading was but another distraction he could do without. Apparently the Lord wanted him to prepare for death by looking only into his own soul. Prepare for death? How long he had been doing just that, while slowly, almost imperceptibly, as his senses failed, the

doors to the outer world were being shut against him. "You brought me here to die," Alphonsus said, addressing God. "Then why do You keep me waiting so long?" Suddenly the analytical mind of the lawyer began to function. Had he any right to assume the premise on which that question was based? Since after four years he was still alive, it must be for some purpose. To test his patience? The answer seemed too simple.

"If some work still remains for me, O Lord, tell me what it is, for I am an old man whose thoughts are as nebulous as sheep pasturing in a fog."

Idly his mind played with the changes which had taken place since his return to Pagani. Year by year the Redemptorists were growing numerically. No doubt some vocations were lost because the government forbade the members to organize as a true religious order. Yet by the grace of God, they had prospered for nearly fifty years in constant danger of suppression by the king. Perhaps they could survive another fifty.

Even now changes were taking place in Naples. Tanucci had quarreled with the queen, fallen from power and been supplanted by the Marquis de Sambuco. King Ferdinand had a new grand almoner, Msgr. Testa of the great Piccolomini family who had long been Dukes of Amalfi. The Sarnelli suit against the Redemptorists had been postponed, then shifted from one court to another, and finally crippled by the deaths of three of its protagonists, appeared likely to peter out.

Alphonsus remembered how on the night of his return to Pagani he had prayed to live long enough to see royal approbation of the rule. "If some work still remains . . ." How stupid he was! He had been preparing for death with the work to be done right under his nose. He felt a fresh flow of vitality, a new hope. God was waiting. The time was ripe. He would once more petition the king for approbation. One more tremendous effort before he died! The paralyzed body, the dim eyes, the deaf ears did not matter. He was not dead yet, and the Holy Ghost would help him.

In the spring of 1779, seven men sat around a table in the monastery. Father Villani, his blonde hair slightly graying and his receding chin covered with a stubble beard, was as affable as ever. As vicar general of the order, he sat to the right of Alphonsus. Among the other men, consultors as they were called, were Father Mazzini, Father Majone, and a young priest whom Alphonsus scarcely knew — Fabricius Cimino. They had been called together to discuss a new petition for approbation. Since it was a secret meeting, both doors and windows were shut. Alphonsus, shorter than the other men and sitting with his head bent forward, felt at a disadvantage because he could not see the faces of his companions. A man's thoughts, he knew, are to be found in his eyes, not in his words.

"This time we must make no compromise," he was saying. "We'll petition for full approbation."

Father Majone objected. "There's no point in asking for something we know will be refused."

Alphonsus leaned forward. "What did you say?"

Majone repeated his comment.

"I can't hear you," Alphonsus said impatiently.

Majone raised his voice. "This is a secret meeting, Father. Do you want me to shout so that everyone in the house can hear?"

Alphonsus could feel six pairs of eyes turned upon him. "Yes, I do," he said.

The tension was broken by Father Villani, who leaned over to Alphonsus and repeated Majone's comment.

"And what," Alphonsus asked, "do you consider certain of refusal?"

"The three vows."

"You'll have to speak louder," Alphonsus said.

Villani repeated for Father Majone. "The three vows."

"The three vows!" Alphonsus cried in consternation. "God knows, Majone, without them we'd perish."

Father Majone got up, walked around the table and leaned over Alphonsus' shoulder, so that he could be heard without

shouting. He assumed the attitude of one explaining something to a childish old man. "We know that the king doesn't want the establishment of any new religious orders. We also know that he has no objection to priests living in community. Let's get the material benefits we need, and God will take care of the spiritual ones."

"Sol" Alphonsus said, "It's the poverty of our houses that you find unpleasant!"

Majone flushed.

"Father Rector is right," Mazzini said quickly, to preclude any retort. "Without the vows, the rule would be a mockery. On the other hand, Father Majone has suggested something we should consider. We may be able to save the rule only by making some small concessions. . . ."

"What, for instance?" Villani asked.

Dead silence followed.

"In the last petition, the king objected to the holding of chapter meetings," Majone said.

"Without chapter meetings, we'd disintegrate," Alphonsus said, thinking of Father de Paula. "Each foundation would go its own way, introducing innovations until the rule would mean nothing."

At this point everyone began talking at once, and Alphonsus could hear only a confusion of voices. He sat, face forward, looking at the papers in front of him, praying for the grace of patience. Finally he interrupted, "If you have anything to say, address your remarks to the rector major."

Majone turned to the man next to him and asked, "How can we, when we can't make him hear?"

Mazzini, however, asked Alphonsus, "Are you willing to agree that we could make some concessions for the sake of approbation?"

"None that have been suggested so far."

"Have you any suggestions yourself, Father?"

Alphonsus nodded. "I have. Father Majone believes that we should secure our material interests first. He has little understanding of the men we have to deal with."

"You forget," Father Majone said irritably and speaking now loud enough for the rector major to hear, "that I've been handling the legal affairs of the community for the past five years."

"The government," said Alphonsus, "doesn't care about our spiritual success or failure, but it does care about our material situation. It is determined that we shall not acquire the goods of the world. All the anticlericalism and persecution of the past twenty-five years has been based on a fable that the Church is too rich — that it must be impoverished."

"But, Father," Villani put in, "anticlericalism has a philosophical basis. . . ."

"To the scholar, yes. To the men in Naples, money is what matters. There the root of the whole evil lies — in money. Remember that I've been through this before, trudging from one corrupt statesman to another. We aren't dealing with men of principle. My stand is exactly the reverse of Father Majone's. If we take care of our spiritual interests, God will see that we prosper materially. Therefore, I suggest that we ask for everything except the right to acquire property."

"It sounds fine," Majone said. "Is it practical?"

"Do we need to be practical?" Alphonsus asked. "We've already taken vows of poverty. Is it so hard to keep them?"

"In this day and age . . . " Majone began.

"In this day and age!" Alphonsus cried angrily. "We aren't living in this day and age, Father Majone. We are living in the timelessness of eternity. Our model is not an eighteenth century one! It is Jesus Christ Himself. He has told us to become like the lilies of the field. Are we afraid to take Him at His word?"

Alphonsus could not see Majone's face, frozen into a tight stubbornness. Neither could he see the faces of the other consultors, and he wondered about the attitude of the younger men who had not spoken. He was therefore gratified that, when the final decision was made, they stood with him. It was agreed, in spite of Majone's objection, that the petition should ask for everything except the right to acquire property.

Since Alphonsus was by that time extremely tired, the meeting was adjourned.

One question still remained: Who would go to Naples to handle the negotiations? Father Villani had already apprised Alphonsus of his own preference. The problems that would arise would certainly be technical ones requiring legal knowledge. Among the Redemptorists at Pagani there was only one lawyer — Majone.

Alphonsus grumbled. "Father Majone is against me in everything."

"There's no doubt that he's stubborn," Villani said, "but that stubbornness may be just what he'll need if he's going to get the job done. Besides, you will already have approved the new manuscript of the rule, and in the end all the papers will be returned for your signature. Nothing can go wrong."

Alphonsus was forced to admit that Majone was the only man qualified for the task. When the next meeting was held, the choice met with no opposition. Father Cimino was selected to accompany him merely in the capacity of an observer. Although inexperienced, he was a man whose potentialities must gradually be developed. This could serve as the beginning of his apprenticeship.

"Remember just one thing," Alphonsus said to Majone, giving special emphasis to the words. "You are not to change one essential point in the rule, no matter what pressure is brought to bear on you. And it's my guess the grand almoner will bring a great deal of pressure."

Majone nodded. "I've been in Naples half a dozen times, Father, looking after the Sarnelli case. I think I know what to do."

"Very well. We shall all pray for you."

"Thank you. But I want something in addition to your prayers."

"Yes?" Alphonsus' fingers tapped the table lightly. "What?"

"You're asking me to undertake a delicate mission. It's been evident from our own meetings that there's much diversity of opinion among us. There must be even more in the different

houses. It will only complicate matters if everyone knows what we're doing. Rumors spread quickly, and they're seldom true. I'd like all those at the meeting to bind themselves by oath to the strictest secrecy."

It was a strange request, but Alphonsus granted it. Silence would do no harm.

XXI

"MAJONE SHOULD HAVE EXACTED an oath of secrecy from the grand almoner," Alphonsus said. He had been taken into the garden in a wheelchair and had brought with him the letters from Ciorani and Ilceto which Brother Romito had already read to him.

Father Villani sat beside him, going over them for the second time.

"I don't care about the other houses knowing what we're doing," Alphonsus continued. "Secrecy was Majone's idea, not mine. But why do they think I'd consent to any basic change in the rule? Where did that rumor start?"

"We did agree to one change," Villani reminded him.

"Nonsense! The acquisition of property has nothing to do with the rule. That's a disability already imposed upon us."

Villani had to admit that he was right. "As long as the rumor is false, it really doesn't matter."

"One thing does matter," Alphonsus insisted, and his voice revealed bitter disappointment, "that the rectors at Ciorani and Ilceto have so little faith in me. By now they should know that I'd give my life for the rule. But they don't."

"We're all human, Father."

"I know. God forgive me for my pride in caring."

"Don't fret about it," Villani said solicitously. "A reassurance from you will set everything right."

Alphonsus dictated the reassuring letters to Brother Romito that afternoon. Then he tried to put the whole matter out of his mind. "Everything is in the lap of God," he thought; but even that knowledge failed to quiet the irritation he felt because his own weak, useless body could not make a trip to Naples. He

was hurt because the rectors had no faith in him, as if he had any right to demand faith when he had so little himself. Why should he feel uneasy about Father Majone? Had they not all given up their property, their lives, their very wills for this one end? And had they not lived together year after year, dreaming and talking about the day when the rule would be approved? The recurring idea that he should be in Naples handling the matter himself was only a temptation to pride. When would he ever come to the realization that he amounted to nothing? God had seen fit to make use of that nothing to found a religious order. Now he was an old man, already smelling the grave dust in his blankets. It was time that God should cast him aside and make use of some other tool. Should the worn-out, corroded plowshare fear that a new blade will not cut so deep? Pride! Pride! Pride! The blade will cut either deep or shallow as the plowman shifts his draft chain. To feel uneasy about Majone was only another way of feeling uneasy about God. A sense of nausea made Alphonsus think for a moment that he was going to be sick. Fortunately, Brother Romito came in to tell him it was time for his carriage ride.

In September Father Majone returned. He looked as if he had been through some devastating illness. Alphonsus, who could not see his face, noticed only the unsteadiness of his hands.

"It was hot in Naples," he said.

The statement was ambiguous, Alphonsus thought. But then nothing mattered except the rule. "The rule, the rule," he said impatiently. "Is it going to be approved?"

"Yes, Father, at last." Majone pressed the rector major's hand with his own warm, wet palm. "Msgr. Testa promises that everything is settled. You're to read the rule, so you'll know just what changes are there."

"Changes!" Alphonsus cried. "But there were to be no changes!"

"Don't get upset, Father," Majone said. "You know these men at court. They always have to do something, if only as a gesture of authority. Nothing satisfies them. Msgr. Testa even busied him-

self about the structure of the sentences. What does that sort of thing amount to?"

"Let me see the rule!" Alphonsus demanded.

"All you have to do," Majone explained, "is to read and sign it. Then I take it back to Naples. After that the royal council will return it together with the official letters of approbation."

"Let me see it!" Alphonsus repeated.

Father Majone unfolded the document. "Here it is, Father."

It was early evening and Alphonsus suddenly remembered that Majone had been traveling most of the day. "Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"Go downstairs and tell the brothers to give you something. And send Villani to me."

When Alphonsus was alone, he stared at the manuscript. The handwriting was small and delicate. He turned the first page this way and that, trying to see it better.

Villani came in. "Father Majone looks exhausted."

"I can't see anything," Alphonsus said crossly. "Can you move my chair to the window?"

Father Villani moved the wheelchair.

"Thank you. This is better." Alphonsus held the papers close under his eyes. "Yes, I can see pretty well here."

The first page was concerned with the manner of giving parish missions. A few unnecessary words had been deleted. Here and there some phrases had been inserted, and there were marginal comments. All minor matters. Alphonsus read slowly, word by word, but as usual his head was aching. By the time he had reached the second page his vision began to blur. He grew dizzy. The effort was exhausting. He put the manuscript across his knees, closed his eyes and felt ashamed of himself. Once again he asked: Should the old plowshare fear that the new blade will not cut so deep? God was using another implement for His glory; he must put his mind at rest.

"Father Villani, I can't read any longer. You'll have to look it over for me."

Villani took the manuscript. He read rapidly, turning the pages one by one. "Father Majone has done well," he said.

"Thank God." Alphonsus closed his eyes again. After a moment he opened them to ask, "When is he returning to Naples?"

"He wants to go back tomorrow. The grand almoner expects to push the application through quickly."

"Then by all means send him back tomorrow! A delay could be disastrous. If everything's in order, I'm ready to sign."

Father Villani handed him the sheet with the blank for his signature, sliding a book under it for writing surface. Then he reached for a quill.

Alphonsus took the quill and painfully outlined the awkward, almost illegible signature of his old age. "At last I can die in peace," he murmured. "Glory to God for His goodness."

After Father Villani had gone downstairs, Alphonsus relaxed. The sun had set; the room was gradually growing darker. Looking out the window, his dim eyes could discern little more than a pattern of light and dark, where the black branches of the trees formed a filigree against the twilit sky.

During October it rained almost steadily. A damp, musty odor clung to the monastery. Mildew appeared on the woolens and the books, and every week the lay brothers spread them out to dry. The atmosphere was so murky that candles burned all day in Alphonsus' room, where he sat looking out the window, as if his eyes were still sharp enough to spot Father Majone on his return.

"I thought the grand almoner was going to put the approbation through quickly," he said.

"It's only been a month," Villani replied. "Father Mazzini starts his mission in Angri today. It's bad weather. Besides, a sickness is spreading among the people there."

"It seems like years. It's possible Msgr. Testa can't handle the king after all."

"But the queen can," Villani said cheerfully. "Since Tanucci's fall, she rules everything."

"On the other hand, Ferdinand may be off hunting." Alphonsus did not realize that Villani had left the room.

During these days Alphonsus was forever talking about the king, who was said to be even worse than his father, filling the royal forests with game, flogging poachers and boasting continually about how he could pick off birds on the wing with his new English fowling piece. He seldom called councils of state; and when he did, forbade inkstands on the table lest writing cause delay. He was too bored to sign his name to an act of government. Alphonsus hoped he would not be too bored to sign the act of approbation.

November passed. Christmas came and went. Still Majone did not return. From time to time he wrote about unavoidable delays, difficulties in making appointments, and the sloppy Neapolitan weather. Meanwhile, a new series of letters came from the different houses of the institute. Word had spread that the new rule which Alphonsus had signed was entirely different from the old one. What had happened? Why had no one been consulted? It was apparent that the houses were in a state of excitement. Alphonsus patiently dictated replies. "I have signed no new rule," he repeated.

"Why do they keep bothering me!" he exclaimed to Brother Romito.

On January 26, 1780, he was caught in a grip of desolation such as he had never known before. He was unable to eat. He was beset by temptations. When he tried to pray, he could not even remember the words of the Hail Mary, and he wondered if he was losing his mind. Hastily he sent a letter to the rector of Ciorani, begging for prayers, because, he said, "I foresee that during this year the devil will make efforts to cause disquiet among us, as much as he can."

Before the week was out he learned that on that same miserable day the letters of approbation had been signed. Majone sent the news with an apology for not bringing the papers at once. Unfortunately some routine matters still demanded his attention. He

hoped that the rector major would be patient a little longer.

"At least you have no further cause for worry," Brother Romito said as he put Alphonsus in his carriage.

The day happened to be sunny, and Alphonsus wondered why he could not respond to the news, the sunshine or Brother Romito's good spirits.

Toward the end of February he fell ill. When he tried to sit up, he was seized by dizziness. A numbness, beginning in his finger tips, crept through his hands and into his arms. One night Brother Romito, bringing him some broth, discovered that he could not handle the spoon and had to be fed. Yet he protested against staying in bed and grumbled at having a warming-pan under his feet.

Later that same evening when Brother Romito returned to replenish the coals, he found Alphonsus asleep. He lighted the lamp and quietly left, coming downstairs just as one of the lay brothers opened the front door. A cold wind swept into the monastery and with it came Father Gaspar Cajone, from Beneventum.

"Father Cajone!" the lay brother exclaimed.

Villani, hearing the name, hurried into the room. "Why, Father, what in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm on my way to Salerno."

"Of course." Villani remembered that a mission was about to open there. "But we didn't expect you."

"And I didn't expect to be here." Cajone had taken off his coat and was opening his valise. "I passed through Naples and saw Father Majone. He can't come to Pagani yet, but he asked me to bring the letters of approbation." From the valise he extracted a sealed envelope and handed it to Villani.

"God be praised!" Villani said. "We've waited a long time."

He was halfway up the staircase when Brother Romito interposed. "The rector major is sleeping now."

Cajone was surprised. "Sleeping?"

"He's been ill," Villani explained. "If he's asleep, these will have to wait until morning." He gave Father Cajone a sharp glance. "Have you seen them?"

Father Cajone shook his head. "No. They were given to me sealed."

At that moment the dinner bell rang.

Alphonsus wakened the next morning to find the sunlight streaming through his window. He had slept long. He commended himself to God, felt of his fingers and discovered the numbness had almost disappeared. There was a knock on the door, and Brother Romito came in. Behind him were Father Villani, Father Cajone, and half a dozen other priests. Unable to wait, they had already broken the seal of the envelope and read its contents. Now they crowded about Alphonsus, and for once, because he was still lying on his back, he could see their faces. Even through the dimness of his blurred vision, he knew that something was wrong.

"Father Cajone! What are you doing here?"

"I brought the letters of approbation, Father." And against his will, the accusation burst forth. "You promised the rule would not be changed. Why did you lie?"

"It's not been changed! It's not been changed!" Alphonsus cried out, feeling a chill run through him. "Why is everyone here? What's happened?"

In the torrent of excitement that followed, Alphonsus could understand no one.

"Be quiet! Please. Let me see the papers."

Cajone was already thrusting them into his hand. "What have you done to us?" he shouted, remembering in his dismay that Alphonsus was deaf. Quickly he turned the sheets. "Look, the three vows of religion are gone! And the oath of perseverance! The authority of the rector major has been taken away! There can be no holding of chapter meetings!"

Alphonsus' head was whirling. His body shook with sobs. "No! No! No!" he cried, while the group of stricken priests looked

down upon him. His glance passed from one sad face to another, until it reached Father Villani's. "Father, Father!" The words struck like a sword thrust. "I never thought you could deceive me so. I have been betrayed by my friends."

The desolation of the last sentence was to echo in Father Villani's ears until the day of his death. Not daring to look at his superior, he covered his face with his hands.

Sheer exhaustion had forced Alphonsus to lie quiet—a miserable, contorted body and a mouth convulsed as if with pain. Brother Romito knelt and held the old man's hands.

Only when Villani uncovered his face, did Alphonsus speak again, then in a hoarse, thin voice scarcely recognizable to his companions. "I have destroyed the Order. I deserve to be dragged through the streets for not reading the papers myself." The voice broke. Then he looked at them with terrified eyes, begging for forgiveness. "You know I can hardly see enough to read."

"Please, Father," Villani begged. "It wasn't your fault. Does it make any difference what the king signs? Can't we live as we always have?"

"No," Alphonsus said bitterly. "That's impossible now."

Villani came to the bedside and stood beside Brother Romito. "Father, don't you see that Majone did what seemed to be prudent?"

"Was it prudent to break his vow of obedience?" Alphonsus asked harshly.

"He thought it was the only way to save the order."

"I see. One saves the order by destroying it," Alphonsus said. "And you . . . what about yourself?"

This was more than Villani could bear. "God forgive me!" he whispered, remembering that terrible afternoon when he had tried to save an old man from suffering. Instead he had increased the suffering tenfold.

All that day Alphonsus remained in his room with Brother Romito. "If I could only say Mass," he whispered. "God has taken even that consolation away from me."

Brother Romito laid his head gently against the sharp, thin shoulder of his superior. "May God pardon them for their sins."

"No, no, Brother. Don't accuse anyone," Alphonsus said.

"Majone was afraid to bring the papers back himself, Father. He's hiding in Naples like a frightened hare."

"Whatever has happened is according to God's will. Don't blame Father Majone. God must have wanted it done. Yes, He wanted to punish me for my sins. All my life I've crucified Him, and this is the sign He sends me."

He asked Brother Romito to read aloud the Passion of the Lord according to the Gospel of St. Matthew. That reading marked the end of his lamentations.

A week later he was sitting quietly at the window with a pile of letters in his lap. He was answering the complaints, the questions, the accusations that had poured in from the other houses. No one was to blame but himself, he insisted; and he promised that he would never consent to adopting the changes. Finally he dictated a letter to Father Majone:

. . . let us forget all the past and put all that has happened under our feet. I beg you to go back to your house at Ciorani, or if that house does not please you, choose which you will. Rest assured that I for my part will love you as before, and you will see it from experience. Remain consultant as before, and give your opinion on all the pressing affairs of the Congregation. As for your reputation, leave it in my hands; it will be my constant thought to defend it, both before our companions and strangers. Let us then be at peace. I beg it by the wounds of Christ.

Father Majone chose not to return to Ciorani. Like a tragic hero driven by the Erinyes, he fled to the Papal States. Finding no peace there, he rejoined his companions in the Kingdom of Naples. Nothing could cure his restlessness. Eventually he packed his traveling bag for the last time, closed the door of the monastery behind him, and returned to the Redemptorists no more.

XXII

FATHER FRANCIS DE PAULA, rector of the house at Frosinone, spread his thick, muscular hands across his knees and thrust his chin forward. A man in his middle forties, he still had the clear skin and flashing eyes of youth. His vitality seemed to fill the little room where he had been summoned for a private interview with the rector major. He had not seen Alphonsus for a good many years, and now it annoyed him that, unable to look into his superior's face, he must address only the bald pate with its ring of frizzled, gray hair. Folds of black worsted beneath it scarcely suggested a body. Against those folds two fleshless hands, twisted with rheumatism, fingered the rosary.

Father de Paula could hear voices and the scraping of chairs in the chapter room below, where delegates from each of the community's houses were engaged in heated argument. It was May 14, 1780. Alphonsus had called a meeting for the purpose of studying the rule approved by the king and drawing up a list of objections. These, he hoped, could be presented to His Majesty with a petition for emendation.

"Let there be no recriminations," Alphonsus was saying to Father de Paula. "I take all the blame. But at least give me a chance to make reparation. We can save the order only through love of God and of one another."

"I haven't accused anyone," de Paula said exasperated. "For years I've endured with patience your complaints, your criticisms, your reprimands. Now you ask me to do something against my conscience."

The hands tightened on the rosary. "God forbid! Is it against your conscience to work with us until we get back our original rule?"

"Don't you see how impossible that is?"

"No, I don't."

"You've allowed the King of Naples to change the rule of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer — a rule approved by Pope Benedict. We in the Papal States are outside the Kingdom of Naples. Ferdinand is a foreign prince. You're under obedience to him. We remain under obedience to the Holy See."

"The devil has twisted your tongue, Father de Paula. And he wouldn't unless some secret ambition gnawed at your heart."

"Secret ambition!" de Paula cried. "Yes, I have a secret ambition, but it's not what you think. My secret ambition is for the rule. In your shoes, I would have died defying the king."

"If we defied the king, the order would be suppressed."

"What order?" de Paula asked cruelly. "To avoid suppression, you chose to destroy it. Now you have no order."

Under the force of de Paula's accusation, the figure in the chair contracted. "Is the rule only something written on paper, or is it written in the heart and the will? By the wounds of Christ, Father, I beg you to stay with us. In God's good time these abuses will be corrected, and we'll rejoice together in freedom and unity."

"You think of nothing but the houses in Naples! Suppose you had a foundation in France, and without so much as consulting you, their superior changed the Redemptorist rule to please King Louis. Would you be governed by that change? Of course not, it would be sheer madness. Yet that's what you expect us to do."

Alphonsus was thinking: "He doesn't really care. All he wants is to be superior of the houses in the Papal States, and God knows, he'll have his way." Aloud he said, "No one is asking you to abandon the original rule. We ask only that you give us your strength — your support — until the situation is corrected."

"Of course we'll give you support. But as to government," de Paula asked, "can we be governed by superiors whose rule is different from our own?"

"Then who is to govern you?"

"That's the problem we face." The words had a sharp, cold edge. "We hope it will be solved by the Holy See."

"What! What do you mean?"

"Simply that I've written to Rome for instructions. You see," said de Paula very quietly now, "we must have some authority to call a general chapter and elect a superior for the papal houses."

"Yes, I see." Alphonsus had drawn back like a caged bird trying to keep beyond reach of its tormentor.

De Paula did not notice. He was anxious to end the interview and rejoin the men downstairs.

"Go back to the meeting," Alphonsus whispered, reading his thoughts. "I've sinned enough already. When you came you brought the devil with you. Take him away! Take him into the chapter room if you must! Take him anywhere, but leave me in peace!"

Peace, he thought when he was alone again. Was there never to be peace? He might have guessed de Paula would appeal to Rome. At first the houses in the Papal States had claimed they could not send delegates to the assembly, lest the Holy See think they also had abandoned their holy rule. In the end they came grudgingly, only under obedience. Wherever de Paula had been rector — at St. Angelo, at Sciffeli, at Frosinone — he had sown discord. His vitality, his flashing eyes, his confidence had won them all.

That night Alphonsus announced, "Tomorrow I will attend the meeting myself."

"You can't!" Villani said.

"I will," Alphonsus countered. "No one can keep me away."

"The strain will kill you."

"I hope to God it does."

"Besides," Villani explained, "everyone talks at once. You'd hear nothing but the hubbub."

The old man cried out bitterly, beating his knees with clenched fists, "Am I supposed to sit in my room all day, doing nothing, while the friends I love — whom I hold to my heart with Christ — are destroying me downstairs?"

"They aren't destroying you, Father. Everyone knows that you've done nothing wrong."

"Up here alone," Alphonsus said, "I am killing myself."

"God will save you from that, Father. God knows I failed you in the past. But believe me, now we're doing our best. Besides our great hope lies in prayer. More than anything else we need your prayers."

The next morning Alphonsus lay in bed praying: "Give me the strength to walk again! Give me the strength to go downstairs." Without daring to call Brother Romito, he slid to the edge of the bed, put his feet down, and steadying himself as best he could, tried to stand. A moment later he lay in a miserable heap on the floor. There Brother Romito found him sobbing.

For more than a month the delegates argued, quarreled and came to no solution. When at last a vote was called for, the priests from the Papal States refused to cast their ballots.

"We aren't under your rule," they insisted. "How can we vote?"

On June 26 the meeting adjourned, with nothing accomplished.

In the weeks that followed, a stillness fell over the house at Pagani. It seemed to Alphonsus like the stillness of death. Under the fire of a blazing sun, the garden flowers wilted and died. The birds ceased to sing. But there was also a fire burning in the old man's heart, eating it away with a pain greater than any he had endured in the flesh. Thus the souls of the damned, he thought, must be eaten by fire eternally in hell. Yet only in the true hell is it given man to abandon hope. Each morning, with Brother Romito's help, he dragged himself from his bed and dictated letters. He would continue to fight, blindly and desperately, until the heart stopped beating in his breast.

He had already forgiven Majone, and the wrong that Father Villani had done was, he knew, motivated by love. Alphonsus did not doubt that his old confessor would willingly die for him. As for the others—he seldom allowed himself to ask what part they had played in the betrayal. Some things only the angels in heaven should know. But the younger priests in the Neapolitan houses, baffled and uncertain of what to do, passed over one by one to the Papal States. Each defection affected Alphonsus like

the loss of blood. Then in Ilceto the master of novices took with him twelve scholastics and went to join Father de Paula.

"I shall go there myself," Alphonsus decided, "and die under the rule I founded."

"You would perish before you got there," Villani said, "and besides it would be the end of the houses in the Kingdom of Naples."

Finally it was rumored that the Holy Father had forbidden the houses in the Papal States to obey their Neapolitan superiors and had placed them temporarily under Father de Paula.

"No, no! It's a lie," Alphonsus declared. To prove that he was right, he wrote to the rector of St. Angelo, calling him to Pagani.

"I cannot come," the rector replied; "I have been forbidden to do so."

In desperation Alphonsus sent Fathers Tannoia and Gallo to intercede in Rome, and the summer came to an end.

A white cloth had been laid on the altar in Alphonsus' room. Two slender vases held lavender asters, the candles were lighted. Soon one of the priests would come to say Mass and give the rector major Holy Communion. Alphonsus sat in his chair, for he could not kneel. He was bent forward as far as his paralyzed body would permit. His eyes were closed. He was making his morning preparation. The garden under his window, heavy with October dew, waited for the first warm touch of morning sun. These were the moments when Alphonsus passed out of the miseries of time into the white peace of eternity. Alone with God, he could shed, like a moth-eaten garment, the self-accusations, the anger, the discouragement. Thus for a little while every day the tired, weak body forgot its pain, the soul forgot its bitterness.

He felt a hand grip his shoulder and knew someone was there. Yet he was loath to be drawn out of that luminous abyss of love into which he had just plunged.

"Father, Father," a voice said impatiently. "Father! the men are back from Rome."

Alphonsus opened his eyes and found himself once more, wracked with pain, sitting in a chair before the altar. Father Villani stood beside him.

"The men are back from Rome," he said again. "They were too late."

"Too late for what?" Alphonsus asked.

"The Holy Father had already signed the decree." Villani pulled a chair beside Alphonsus and sat down.

"What decree are you talking about?"

"How can I tell you, Father! He's excluded us from the order!"

"Excluded us from the order!" The words came slowly, as if the mind could not grasp them. Alphonsus broke into tears.

"Father de Paula misrepresented everything. The formal decree states that having abandoned our rule, we are no longer members of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. All our faculties and privileges have been withdrawn."

"Through my sins — through my most grievous sins — I have ruined us all," Alphonsus murmured.

From the wretchedness of his own conscience Villani could draw no comforting words. But he remained sitting beside Alphonsus until the priest came in to say Mass.

"I've been making my preparation for Holy Communion," Alphonsus said quietly, when he was aware that Mass was about to begin. "I wish only what God wishes. His grace is sufficient. The pope will have it so. May God be praised." He folded his hands and his lips began moving in prayer. Once again he lost all touch with the world.

After Mass, when he had finished his thanksgiving and the candles had been snuffed, Brother Romito brought him breakfast.

"I can't eat, Brother."

"Then why don't you take your ride now?" Brother Romito suggested. "Maybe when you come back you'll have an appetite."

"Very well. Send for the carriage."

Alone among the cushions of the carriage, the blanket tucked under his knees and the cool autumn air in his nostrils, Alphonsus

faced the horrible consequences of the pope's decree. The creak of wheels, the jogging of the vehicle, the thud of hoofs set up a rhythm out of which came rhythmic responses. "I am punished for my sins—for my sins—for my sins." The phrases recurred as the wheels turned. Then Alphonsus became aware of something. Was it a presence? It had neither body nor face, yet from it flowed a mockery so hateful, so devoid of love that it curdled the blood in his veins. The presence did not speak. It did not need to, for it had the power of penetrating substance. Like a finger it touched the innermost recesses of his mind, awakening undreamed of thoughts and transforming them to its will. Sin was a voluntary turning away from God. Of that, Alphonsus had not been guilty. He had called out for God, pursued Him, served Him, suffered for Him, loved Him. In return the Divine Hand had been lifted against him. For his love, it had struck him in the face. For the offering of his body, it had rewarded him with paralysis and pain and blindness. For his fidelity, the Divine Face had given him the kiss of Judas. Was it Love to which he had pledged himself, or was it the Abomination—the horrifying jest of everlasting hatred. The malignancy of a creator . . .

Alphonsus shrieked. Terrified, the driver turned about.

"Home! Home! Take me home, Brother, and hurry!"

Thinking his passenger was in the agony of death, the brother pulled sharply on his reins. The horses stopped. Recklessly he turned them in the middle of the road, sending two peasant girls scurrying into a ditch. Then he stood in his seat and began mercilessly lashing the team. Although the poor beasts could not travel fast, they did their best and the cobblestones rang with the clatter of their hoofs.

Meanwhile Alphonsus swayed from side to side in the seat, groaning aloud. He clapped his hands over his ears, although he knew, or thought he knew, that the diabolic persuasions were coming not from without but from within. "No, no, no," he repeated, his whole being tense with the determination not for one moment to give in.

Hearing the carriage turn into the drive at such a pace, Fathers Villani and Mazzini rushed to the monastery door.

"Help me! Help me!" Alphonsus cried.

They lifted him into their arms and carried him upstairs. There he lay on the bed curled up as if with fever convulsions. His eyes were dilated, burning with a strange light, and at the same time filled with vacuous darkness. He pounded his forehead with his fists. He dug his nails into his sunken cheeks. Once only he spoke, with words driven out of him by some inner violence. "Pray for me! The devil is tempting me to despair."

Mazzini and Villani fell on their knees by the bed. For two hours they prayed, until the eyes became normal, the hands ceased to struggle, and the body gradually relaxed. Then Alphonsus lay quite still, his own lips also moving in prayer. "The pope has thought it good," he said. "God be praised. The will of the pope is the will of God."

The next day he sat quietly dictating letters to Brother Romito. He arranged to send legates both to Rome and to Beneventum. He wrote each of the houses in the Papal States, asking that a representative be sent to Pagani, and when he painfully outlined his signature at the foot of the letters, he remembered that he was no longer a Redemptorist. "Alphonsus Maria de Liguori," he wrote, adding only "Bishop."

"It's unjust to blame Father de Paula," he told Brother Romito. "God is using him for some good end, which we fail to understand. And how wisely the Holy Father has acted. Ferdinand has pre-empted the powers of the Church. It would be folly for Pius to submit."

"He might have protested directly to the king," Brother Romito said.

"Hold your tongue, Brother. You and I see the world with a narrower vision than He does. We look to the good of our Order. He looks to the good of the Church throughout the world. If that good demands destruction of the Redemptorists, let us

offer our sacrifice on the cross with Christ — and do it with love and gratitude. Let us die embracing destruction."

Whatever de Paula's personal ambitions were, it became clear within the next few weeks that his appeal to Rome had brought more drastic action than he had wanted. Alphonsus had the consolation of learning that the houses in the Papal States were at last eager to work with him toward eventual reunion under the original rule. De Paula went to Rome himself, and from there he begged Alphonsus to send someone from the Neapolitan houses. But no one could go from the Kingdom of Naples without royal permission. Alphonsus drew up one petition for the Holy Father, and another for the king. They did no good.

In 1781 the pope confirmed his earlier decree, adding the comment: "No further supplications will be heard." The last door was thus slammed shut and locked, and Alphonsus ceased to write.

XXIII

SIX YEARS LATER, in the month of July, Alphonsus lay in bed. His eyes were closed, his hands quietly folded on the coverlet. At last, glory be to God, he was going to die. For nearly a week his friends had been dropping in, pretending to be casual, as if he didn't know even better than they that his hour had come. With the increasing weakness of his body, the pains which had tortured him for many years subsided. Although he was almost blind, he could still make out the bright square of light which was his window and the outline of the altar against the wall. He had asked Brother Romito to lay his habit across the bed, so that when he stretched his arms down he could touch it. He would wear it again when he lay in his coffin, and with a childish longing he hoped that God would let him wear it through eternity.

As he lay waiting for death, his memory toyed with those last six years. They had been dark. Yet some light had filtered through their darkness. For instance, the new friendship between him and Father de Paula, who had never ceased to work for reunion. Alphonsus felt confident that the congregation would some day be reunited under the original rule. He did not dream, however, that this would be achieved within four years of his own death. Meanwhile, de Paula continued to correspond with his former superior. Without arrogance or self-assurance, he reported the prosperity of his houses, the growing novitiate, the new foundations. He asked Alphonsus for advice, and now when he was no longer under obedience, he accepted correction gratefully. Would he, Alphonsus wondered, accept the same advice from a superior? De Paula was still young. In the event of reunion, would he be able to submit to the authority of a rector major from the Neapolitan houses?

Alphonsus put Father de Paula out of his mind. He slowly moved his hands downward over the coverlet until his fingers could clutch the edge of his habit. He held onto it tightly and prayed. But the memories came flooding back, confused, without order. He remembered that he was no longer rector major. His last official act had been to call a general meeting, at which Father Villani had been chosen to succeed him. It was a good choice, Alphonsus thought.

After that he had wanted desperately to die. Instead he was condemned to drag himself through more years of uselessness and pain. For the last two he had not even been outside the monastery. The days had settled into a monotonous repetition of sitting in a chair by the window, lying in bed, being carried occasionally to chapel, then back to the chair and back to bed again.

Yet in time he had come to understand. It was not enough to accept the cross. It was not even enough to be crucified upon it. Between the acceptance and the crucifixion, one must carry it as Christ had done — among mocking faces — jostled, buffeted, spat upon. There had been mockery enough. After the Neapolitan houses had fallen under condemnation at Rome, some of the priests had returned to the world, some had moved to other monasteries. Those who remained at Pagani pursued their daily tasks humbly, but withal oppressed by a sense of failure. No new faces appeared among them, for they received no new vocations. Gradually poverty had crept into the house like an invasion of field mice eating the stores away. Even when Rome restored mission faculties to the priests, the situation did not change.

How heavy the burden had been! There were times when Alphonsus had not only stumbled, but fallen — even as Christ had fallen. He had suffered new temptations to despair and a whole year of plaguing scruples which had nearly driven him mad. Vaguely his mind shuttled back and forth between the Passion of Christ and the last years of his own life.

As his strength ebbed, his thoughts became less coherent. He lost all track of time. When the bright square of light across the

room disappeared, he knew it was night; when it returned, he knew it was day. Sometimes people bent over his bed, and wondering who they were, he would make the sign of the cross over them and whisper, "Save your soul!"

Then one day he was too weak to do even that.

On July 25 a calash drove up to the door of the monastery. The driver got out, handed a pair of crutches to the occupant and then held the horse while a tall, spare man carefully alighted. He was Father Dominic Villani from the neighboring village of Nocera, where he was a canon of the cathedral. Although the canon was no relation of the Redemptorist who bore his name, the two men had long been friends. For three years the canon had been suffering from an infected knee. Difficult as it was for him to get about, having heard that Alphonsus Liguori was dying, he had come to ask for the old man's blessing.

Twice he knocked. He could hear voices and footsteps inside the house, but no one came to greet him. He knocked a third time, and Brother Romito opened the door.

"I'm sorry," he said, recognizing the canon. "I don't know where the porter is. Won't you come in?"

He held the door open and the canon swung his body into the house.

"Come into the parlor," Brother Romito said, but there were people in the parlor, standing here and there in silence, as they are wont to do in the anticipation of death. "Perhaps the chapter room . . ." He walked down the hall slowly, hearing the clump of the canon's crutches behind him.

The chapter room was empty. The canon sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs and leaned his crutches against the table. "How bad is he?" he asked.

"He took a turn for the worse this morning."

"Oh. I'm too late then."

"I don't know." Brother Romito hesitated. "We thought he was dying this morning, so everyone went up and he gave us his

blessing. He couldn't talk, but he made the sign of the cross. Then just when we began the prayers, he rallied. Later he fell asleep."

The canon stared at his crutches. "I suppose I shouldn't have come. I knew he would be very weak and unable to recognize me. Just the same, I thought I might get his blessing."

"Perhaps you'd like to see Father Villani."

"No, don't bother him. What resistance the man has! When I was a boy playing in the streets, I saw him for the first time. He was an old man even then. That must have been twenty years ago." The canon was looking at Brother Romito, now also gray and stooped. Becoming an old man himself, the canon thought.

"He's over ninety now, you know. It's a long life for one who's been sick much of the time."

"Not only sick," the canon said, "but tortured."

For a moment Brother Romito's face puckered. He more than anyone else had been the witness of that torture. The memory of it stabbed him.

"The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away," the canon quoted. "Yet with all that suffering he still managed to write his books."

"Over a hundred," Brother Romito said, with a trace of pride in his voice.

"And mark my word, Brother, some controversies he has silenced from now until the end of time." Then the canon added with embarrassment, "You know, I think he's a saint."

"A good many of us think that," Brother Romito said. "Nothing will be the same after he's gone."

"I suppose not." There was a long silence. Then the canon reached for his crutches. "I guess I'd better go."

"No. I'd like to see you get that blessing. Let me go upstairs and see how he is."

Brother Romito left and a few moments later returned. "He's awake. I'll take you up. No harm will be done, and it's just possible he can still manage the blessing. Are you sure you can get upstairs?"

The canon laughed. "I've been going up and down stairs on these props for three years."

"Has it been that long?" Brother Romito was surprised. "It's strange that infection doesn't heal."

With considerable effort the canon got to the top of the stairs. Then he clumped down the hall behind Brother Romito.

"Can you kneel?" Brother Romito asked.

"It's painful, but not impossible."

Brother Romito opened the door to the sickroom and the two men stepped inside. Father Villani was sitting by the bed where Alphonsus lay.

"You won't be able to make him hear," Brother Romito explained. "But if you go to the bed and kneel, he may know what you want."

"God bless you for coming," Father Villani said to the canon, getting up to embrace his friend and namesake. "Don't be too disappointed if he doesn't know you."

"I didn't expect that," the canon said.

"Both Brother Romito and I are needed downstairs, and you've come just in time to help us out. It won't take us long. We'll be back by the time you're ready to leave."

The canon was left alone in the room. He hobbled over to the bed and with great difficulty got down on his knees. Alphonsus' habit, which lay across the coverlet, had slipped down, so that the canon without realizing it knelt on the scapular. Alphonsus remained unseeing, motionless, his eyes still open. Gently the canon touched his hand. Then the eyes of the dying man turned toward him, but with no sign of recognition. Nevertheless, he understood what was wanted of him. With a great effort he lifted his right hand and traced the sign of the cross.

Some time later Brother Romito came down the first floor corridor. The front door stood open. As he glanced through it, he could see the canon getting into his calash. Had he left Alphonsus alone? Brother Romito wondered. It was inexcusable. Chiding himself for his absence, he hurried up to the sickroom,

opened the door and stood still in amazement. On the floor at the foot of the bed lay a pair of crutches. He picked them up and was about to run downstairs in the hope of calling back the calash. Then the truth dawned upon him.

On the morning of August 1 three lay brothers sat at a table in a back room of the monastery. On the table was a deep paste-board box and next to it Alphonsus' habit. Each of the brothers held a pair of shears. They were clipping the habit into pieces no bigger than a fingernail. Meanwhile, in Alphonsus' room, one by one the priests were saying Mass. At eleven o'clock Brother Romito rang the house bell to announce that the prayers for the dying would begin. The three brothers put down their shears and silently went upstairs.

An hour later the angelus rang. In the village of Pagani the cobbler put down his hammer, the baker dropped his dough, the children were called in from the streets for prayer. In the fields adjacent to the monastery the farmers fell to their knees.

Behold the handmaid of the Lord,

Be it done unto me according to Thy word. . . .

Then the prayers were broken off by an unexpected hush. A moment later the ringing resumed, but now it was the slow tolling that announces death.

Epilogue

SCARCELY HAD THE BODY OF ALPHONSUS been laid to rest under the high altar of St. Michael's Church in Pagani than Fathers Villani and de Paula opened the first process preliminary to canonization. Before the task was accomplished, de Paula's old intransigence returned and he was expelled from the order. In 1816, when the ceremony of beatification took place, both men were dead.

The reunited Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, however, continued to grow. By 1839, the year of Alphonsus' canonization, it had spread to Portugal, Belgium, Holland, and the United States. Still the greatness of its founder was not fully recognized.

Only with the definitions of the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and papal infallibility, did St. Alphonsus' stature as a scholar become apparent. He had anticipated both in his writings. Consequently, in 1871 he was declared a Doctor of the Church. So great is this honor that in nineteen hundred years it has been accorded to fewer than twenty men.

